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Rectifier

Prologue

Everywhere was dark. The forest was deserted. There was no trace of animals or any other living beings present here. Total silence. It was as if the place itself was dead.

A blinding gold light shone through the dark night. Something, or rather, someone, appeared from what seemed like the source of the light. The light faded as suddenly as it appeared, and a dark figure fell onto the forest ground.

The figure let out a small groan before pushing himself up from the ground. His eyes swept around swiftly, taking in every detail of his surroundings. Under the dark black hair, his eyebrows furrowed.

Where was he?

Chapter 1: First Encounter

Where was he? He seemed to be in some sort of forest, but it was too dark for him to see anything properly, and he dared not light his wand before he was sure of his safety. Knowing his luck, it would not surprise him if he had managed to drop right in the middle of the forbidden forest.

So that left him one way...

He took a deep breath and concentrated. He felt himself shrinking; his body shifted to his animagus form in an instant. It was in a time like this that he was really glad he had taken the time to learn this complex transformation.

The ground was wet, and he assumed it would be cold too, since no sun light could shine through the massive leaves of the trees.

In his animagus form, he could now see that he was not in the forbidden forest. He had been in that forest enough times to recognize it. So where was he?

If nothing went wrong, then he should be in an alternate universe. But why was he transported into a forest of all places? Though he had been quite sure that his special portkey would work, he had not been able to predict where he would land. He had assumed it would be Hogwarts, where he had started his journey from his own world, or at least the closest spot outside of Hogwarts' anti-apparition ward, but here?

He moved forward, but stopped as a familiar feeling shot through him; it was a something he felt every time when he entered or left Hogwarts.

Why was in there an anti-apparation ward in the middle of a forest? The portkey had dropped him just outside the ward. Whatever had caused the portkey to drop him into this place must be somewhere inside the warded area.

The situation was getting more and more interesting indeed.

He advanced in his animagus form. His transformed body made it easier for him to move between grasses and the roots of the trees.

He had no idea where he was heading for, but something urged him forward, as if there was a strong force attracting him to something.

He soon found himself at the edge of the forest. What he saw made him froze.

No less than twenty cloaked figures were gathering in the forest clearing. They were standing in a half-circle, all wearing white masks. In the middle of the circle was a blonde boy. He was kneeling before a tall figure that seemed to be the leader of them all.

Or was he their master?

Pale skin. Red eyes. Slit-like nose. It looked more like a snake than a man. But it was human, wasn't it? He had met quite a few creatures in his life, but this one... he didn't know what to make of it.

He couldn't see what happened next clearly, all he knew was that the boy suddenly began to scream. The tall figure watched on for a few seconds before turning away, completely undisturbed by whatever he had done to the boy who was now grabbing his arm as if it had been burnt. The group of cloaked figures was equally unsympathetic.

Part of him wanted to rush to the boy's rescue, but the fact that he knew close to nothing of his current situation stopped him. It would be foolish to act like a Gryffindor and reveal himself to dozens of what were clearly dark wizards.

To his relief, the boy managed to push himself from the ground moments later, but-

What in Salazar's name was he doing?

He watched in disgust as the boy crawled forward and kissed the hem of the snake-like figure's robe, as if it was some kind of honor.

Everything about the scene before him pointed to one conclusion - this man... this creature was a Dark Lord, or at least someone who claimed himself to be one.

He grimaced inwardly. Of all the worlds he managed to find...

A movement near the Dark Lord caught his attention. It was a snake, a huge one; it was almost as large as-

He stopped. It couldn't be her, could it? As if hearing his question, the snake turned around. Even though he couldn't see the snake clearly, he knew at once that he had been seen. The snake looked away from him and turned to its master, then-

Before he realized what was happening, the Dark Lord already had his wand pointed straight at him. The next second, a curse – the killing curse - was flying towards him.

Shaking away the sickening sense of déjà vu, he dodged the curse with ease. Knowing that more attacks were sure to come, he turned around and quickly retreated into the forest, heading back to the edge of the anti-apparition ward.

He moved swiftly in his animagus form, but the huge snake was tailing behind him, closing in slowly. He was near the edge of the ward when the snake finally caught up on him.

He dodged the snake's attack but the sight of his attacker also made him stop abruptly.

It was her.

With a soft pop sound he transformed back to his human form, staring at the snake in shock. /Nagini?/

The snake stopped in its assault at the sound of parseltongue. /A speaker? But you sound like- /

/Nagini.../

He took in a sharp breath as he heard another cold hissing voice. Standing before him was the snake-like Dark Lord. His distorted feature sent shiver down his spine.

He reached for his wand, but froze when his eyes met the Dark Lord's. Something about that pair of crimson eyes drew him in, giving him a strange sense of familiarity.

Despite his puzzlement, his instincts quickly took over. The Dark Lord looked as stunned as he was and made no move to stop him as he backed away and ran past the anti-apparition ward. With a last look at the Dark Lord, he disappeared.

He sighed in relief at the sight of the castle as he walked down the path from Hogsmeade. At least Hogwarts did exist in this world.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?"

He stopped in his track. It was a voice he knew well, but he hadn't expected to hear it this close to Hogwarts. He lifted his head as the owner of the voice strode towards him from the edge of the forbidden forest.

He couldn't quite keep the coldness out of his voice as he answered cautiously, "I can ask the same of you."

"I am a professor of this school." The man sneered. "Now answer my question. Who are you?" His tone was quiet yet dangerous.

A professor? Snape as a teacher?

"I am here to see Albus Dumbledore," he said, inwardly hoping that Albus was the headmaster here.

Snape studied him suspiciously. "Follow me."

Without waiting for a reply, Snape turned on his heels and strode towards the castle. He shook his head in disbelief and walked after the man, wondering if it was even possible for one to get so many surprises in one single night.

"Wait here," said Snape as he went up the stairways to the headmaster's office.

He did as he was told, taking his time to survey his surrounding. This Hogwarts looked much like the one in his world, but he knew it was not true. Already he could tell that this was not the same Hogwarts that had been his home for so many years. His thoughts returned to what he had seen in that forest and grimaced. What had happened in this world?

Snape returned at that moment, his black robe billowing behind him as usual.

"The headmaster is waiting for you," he said shortly, walking past him without another word.

His glanced over his shoulder and saw Snape striding down the stairs to the dungeons.

Snape must be the head of Slytherin house then.

He ran a hand through his hair in exasperation. He didn't want to imagine what his house would turn out to be with Snape as its head.

Things were getting worse by seconds. He could only hope Albus could help him clear some of the questions instead of creating more.

With that disturbing thought, he climbed up the stairs.

Albus had a faint idea of who the visitor was. Who else would find him at a time like this except someone from the Ministry? Or was it the parent of one of his students? Albus let out a weary sigh. With the news of Voldemort's return, it would not be the first case.

The door opened to reveal his visitor and Albus found himself momentarily paralyzed. That face. Those features. It could only belong to one person.

The man walked into his office calmly and stopped before him.

That was no mistaken. It was a face Albus would never forget. But it was not possible. The pair of eyes that was staring into his own was so full of life – something Albus could not remember ever seeing on that particular face before.

"Albus?" the man said tentatively.

Albus took in a deep breath at that all too familiar voice. He stood up slowly. His voice was filled with disbelief when he spoke.

"Tom?"

Chapter 2: Alternate Reality

Over the years, Tom had learned to read Albus quite well and was rather proud of it. No one knew Albus Dumbledore better than him. And, he supposed, vice versa. He could tell Albus was beyond shocked when he first saw him. And after the initial shock, Albus' eyes had turned cold and his whole demeanor had changed. As far as Tom was concerned, it was never a good sign when Albus' eyes lost their twinkles.

Once again he wondered what had happened in this world. But after his encounter with Nagini and the snake-like Dark Lord, he had a feeling that he would not like the answer.

Taking a deep breath, he smiled politely and began his explanation. "I am sorry for my sudden arrival, headmaster. I know this is rather unexpected, but I assure you that I come in peace," he said carefully, wincing inwardly at the piercing look Albus was giving him. "If I may ask, have you ever heard of the term alternate universe?"

Albus' eyes widened slightly, before the calm façade took its place again. "Alternate universe?"

Tom knew Albus had understood what he was implying, but it was clear that the old wizard did not believe him.

Composing himself, he continued his explanation, "Alternate universe was a hypothesis that there exists many parallel worlds, each varies from the others only slightly at one point in history. As time goes on, those small variations lead to some very different outcomes and, as a result, a countless number of different alternate universes." He paused briefly to let the information sink in. "I was fascinated by this concept and after some research I found that it might be possible to actually travel to an alternate universe. I created a portkey that I believed could carry a person through dimensions. After several tests, I decided to try it for real and arrived here about an hour ago."

But even though his work was apparently a success, it had not brought as much excitement to Tom as it normally would when he managed to accomplish something no one ever could. Something had gone wrong when he traveled across dimensions. He grimaced inwardly at the experience. It was as if he was being torn apart by

several forces, each pulling him in a different direction. The pain was so huge that it made a Cruciatus seems like nothing. This should not have happened, and Tom was determined to find out why.

"So you are saying that you came from an alternate universe?" Albus said after a moment of silence, his expression guarded.

Tom let out a small sigh. If the Dark Lord he had seen just now was indeed who he thought it was, then he knew he was in deep trouble. How could he convince Albus that his seemingly far-fetched story was true?

As if answering his question, Tom felt something heavy land on his shoulder. He smiled despite his predicament and turned to the familiar phoenix.

"Hello, Fawkes," he greeted the phoenix warmly, patting Fawkes' back.

To Tom's surprise, Albus relaxed at this simple act. The old wizard's face softened and once again his eyes were twinkling madly. Tom blinked, before remembering what he had read about the phoenix species. This particular creature rarely showed familiarity. And only those who were trustworthy could gain a phoenix's approval. Tom could still remember clearly how shocked he had been when the other version of Fawkes had first perched himself on his shoulder.

Seeing that Albus had finally let down his guard, Tom straightened himself. "Forgive my rudeness, headmaster. I haven't introduced myself, have I?" Smiling widely, he held out his hand. "Tom Marvolo Riddle. Nice to meet you, Albus."

Albus stared at the man before him in amazement. He had heard of the theory of alternate universes before, but from what he had heard of, no one had ever been able to travel across dimensions. But what amazed him most was the sight in front of him: Tom Riddle, sitting across from him calmly with Fawkes the phoenix perched on his shoulder.

He had been doubtful when the man first told him where he came from. Even though he knew Hogwarts would not have allowed the man to enter had he had any ill intentions, he knew Voldemort was capable of doing anything just to get rid of him. But Fawkes had

cleared away his doubts. He could not remember seeing Fawkes showing such affection to anyone other than Harry and himself before.

He studied the man before him closely. So this was Tom Riddle? Or rather, what the man could have been? Shoulder-length black hair and sharp blue eyes, he looked similar to the young Slytherin Albus had taught more than fifty years ago, only older. The man looked to be in his fifties, but in reality, Albus knew Tom was already seventy years old. Slow-aging, a trait of witches and wizards, it was especially obvious in those who were strong in magic.

Although only having met the man for a short time, Albus could already see that while the man had some traits that Albus could recognize from what he remembered of Tom Riddle, this Tom was also very different from that disturbed young man in Albus' memory. This Tom was confident as usual, but in his eyes Albus could see a kind of wisdom that could only be gained through hardships. And the most noticeable difference was that this Tom seemed content and... happy, something Albus had never seen from Lord Voldemort.

"I must say, I'm amazed... Tom." Albus half-expected a protest at the name, but none came. "No one has ever managed to confirm the existence of alternate universes, let alone traveled to one of them."

Tom's blue eyes shone with satisfaction. "It started out as a crazy idea and it took me a long time to figure out how to actually make it work. And of course, your other-self helped me quite a lot with it."

"I take it we are close in your world?" asked Albus, curious at the Tom's ease when mentioning his other-self.

"We are," said Tom with a smile, a genuine smile that Albus had rarely seen from that man. He paused for a short while, then he asked, almost hesitantly, "But we are not close here, are we?"

Albus found himself smiling sadly. "I'm afraid that is an understatement, Tom," he said.

A calculating look entered Tom's eyes. "This world is... so different from mine."

"I suppose it would be." Albus sighed. "We are at war, Tom."

And that statement had double meaning.

"There's another Dark Lord, right?" asked Tom tentatively. "I've met him."

Tom managed to catch Albus off guard for the second time that night.

"You've met him?"

Tom nodded. "The portkey brought me near to his meeting place when I arrived in this world. The Dark Lord seemed rather shocked when he saw me."

"He saw you?" Albus blinked. "Ah, I can imagine why he was shocked."

Tom rubbed his temple. "Who exactly is that Dark Lord, Albus?" he asked slowly.

Albus wondered how he should break the news to Tom. But knowing the man, it would not surprise him if Tom had already figured it out himself.

"The Dark Lord did not use his birth name," he began carefully. "He called himself-"

"Lord Voldemort?" Tom interrupted quietly.

Albus nodded. Tom had indeed figured it out then, and curiously, he also knew of the name Voldemort.

"That's why I landed right next to his meeting place," Tom muttered. He closed his eyes. "So that's... what I would have become?"

Albus observed the man before him closely, taking in any details that might help him understand more about his unexpected guest. Tom didn't seem overly shocked that his alternate self had turned into a Dark Lord. Coupled with the fact that he had heard of the name Voldemort, Albus had an impression that as different as this

Tom Riddle seemed to be now, he too had once sought power like his counterpart in this world had.

Tom eyed Albus wearily. "Tell me about Voldemort."

Tom's tone was not the commanding one that Albus remembered, it was more like... a casual request to someone so close to him that such formality had become unnecessary. Albus was intrigued with this apparent closeness between Tom and his other-self, but more than anything, he was curious to know what had caused this Tom to choose a different road.

But his questions would have to wait. Focusing back to the man before him, Albus carefully considered how much information he should reveal. It was going to be painful for Tom to hear about his counterpart, but there was no point in hiding it, not when the name Voldemort could be found in nearly every modern history texts in the library. Albus only hoped that Tom would not take it too hard.

Tom frowned as he listened to Albus' tale. Was he really capable of doing all those horrible acts?

Yes, he found himself answering almost without hesitation. He was well aware of what he could have become. And now, it seemed he was soon going to witness with his own eyes what would have been had he not turned back all those years ago.

He let out a small sigh - so much for his brilliant experiment.

Tom knew Albus had left out most of the details of his counterpart's cruelty, but that did little to make him feel better. He could recognize nearly all of the names mentioned by Albus, most of them had been his colleagues or students. But in this world, they had become his victims... or his servants.

Albus then went on to tell him the event that had led to Voldemort's apparent death and what had later transpired between him and a boy named Harry Potter.

"Harry?" Tom muttered the name. "He's done all that?"

Tom had known Harry in his world, of course. After all, how could anyone in Hogwarts not know Harry James Potter after all the

pranks the boy had pulled? But despite that, Harry had always been one of Tom's favorite students. The boy was bright, cunning and brave - a nice mix of Slytherin and Gryffindor.

From what Albus had told him, Tom knew this world's Harry would be very different from the boy he knew. This world's Harry basically had an entirely different life than the Harry in Tom's world. And that was all caused by the hands of Voldemort.

The twinkle in Albus' eyes dimmed at the mention of Harry. "Harry has gone through a lot in his young life." Albus closed his eyes. "That child has a great burden on his shoulders, one that he shouldn't need to bear."

Despite the old wizard's effort to suppress it, Tom could tell Albus was feeling very guilty for what had happened to Harry.

"Blaming yourself will not help Harry at all, Albus," he said.

Albus looked up sharply at the comment.

Tom smirked despite the situation. Seeing Albus' startled expressions whenever he managed to catch the old man off guard was satisfactory.

"You are not that hard to read, Albus. I've known you long enough to tell what you are thinking without Legilimency." His smile widened. "Good to know that skill seems to be universal."

Albus laughed and shook his head. "You never ceased to amaze me, Tom."

"So I've heard many times before, headmaster."

Albus' laugh made Tom feel a little more comfortable with this whole situation. The unfamiliarity of this world was starting to become too much.

But while a part of him still felt sick at what his other-self had done, what he could have done, the part of him that was crazy enough to go through all the trouble just to prove the existence of alternate universes was already planning his own exploring of his world. After all, that was the whole point of him being here, wasn't it? He had no

wish to meet his other-self again... for now, but a little information gathering couldn't hurt.

"So how long are you going to stay, Tom?" asked Albus, popping a piece of lemon drop into his mouth.

"That is actually part of the experiment," said Tom. "I am to test how the universe itself would react to a person that belongs to another world. Your counterpart's theory is that the universe would automatically kick me back to my own world after a certain period of time. I, on the other hand, believe that I can stay here for as long as I like without any side-effects. We made a bet on it, actually," he added with a smirk. "Anyway, I would be staying for at most a year. Or, if your counterpart is right, I might disappear after a few days or perhaps several months."

Albus raised his eyebrows in amusement. "May I ask where you are going to stay?"

"If it wouldn't be too much of a trouble, I would like to stay here at Hogwarts for now," said Tom, glad that Albus had brought up the subject.

Albus nodded. "I think it would be for the best."

Tom smiled, relived. "It's July now," he said. "I should be able to find a place for myself before the students come back, so there shouldn't be any... complications." Or rather, mass panic, he thought wryly.

"I'll have a guest quarter prepared for you, then." Albus chuckled lightly. "It should be a very interesting year for us all indeed."

Tom couldn't agree more.

A/N: Same as my other stories, there will be no slash. No Tom/Albus, Tom/Harry and definitely no Tom/Voldemort.

Chapter 3: Observer

Albus looked up at the clear sky from the astronomy tower. It was still about an hour from dawn and the absence of sunlight made him feel a little cold on the high tower. The castle was quiet, more so than usual since all students had gone home for the summer holidays a week ago. He shook his head slightly. Summer holidays had just begun and already he was missing the lively school filled with children's laughter. But with the war raging, Albus knew there were lots of things that needed to be done before the new school year began.

His thoughts once again wandered to the man currently resting in one of the guest chambers. Albus always reminded both himself and others that one should move on instead of dwelling on the past. Yet tonight, Albus found himself thinking of what could have been. He wondered what Tom's world was like, and he wondered what had made the difference.

The other Tom had clearly chosen not to become Voldemort. But why had Tom chosen differently? Albus remembered his first meeting with Tom Riddle very well, and he had to admit that there had already been signs of what the boy would grow up to be one day. Was it perhaps Tom's upbringing that had made the difference?

So far, Tom had remained rather closed off about his life. Despite his apparent familiarity with Albus' counterpart, Tom was still reluctant when it came to talking about his past. All Albus had managed to find out was that Tom was teaching at Hogwarts in his own world as the Defense Against the Dark Arts professor – the irony of which didn't escape Albus. Tom spent most of his free time doing researches on various magical theories. According to him, the research on alternate universes had been the biggest, and craziest, project he had done so far.

The way Tom's eyes had lit up in genuine happiness as he talked about his researches gave Albus a strange feeling. He shook his head. He would indeed need some time to get used to this very different Tom Riddle.

At the same time, Albus was concerned about how Tom would affect the current war. Now that Voldemort was also aware of Tom's presence, Albus feared that it was only a matter of time before Tom

would be dragged into this world's events. And Albus had long learned not to underestimate what Tom Riddle could do. If necessary, he would need to make changes to his plan accordingly. But for now, it might be safest to just keep a close eye on Tom.

Looking down at Hogwarts ground, a light from the direction of the otherwise dark castle caught his attention. He hadn't noticed that one of the rooms in the school was in use until now.

He eyed the windows where light was shining from within and smiled when he recognized which part of the castle that was. He chuckled. It seemed Tom was not resting after all. Somehow, Albus was not surprised that Tom seemed to find the library as more appropriate personal quarters than the guest chamber.

Tom closed the copy of Great Wizarding Events of the Twentieth Century and rubbed his temple. As if he had not heard enough from Albus, he had gone to the school's library to search for more details on Voldemort. But then, he was never one to accept modified half-truth, no matter how painful learning everything would cause him.

Tom snorted. To think he had just arrived several hours ago...

Shaking his head, Tom continued to flip through the history tomes he had piled on the table. The whole mystery surrounding the incident at Godric's Hallow fifteen years ago made him uneasy.

There were only so many ways one could survive the killing curse and Tom knew all of them. He had, after all, written a research paper on that particular curse – the curse that he feared the most.

Cases of surviving the killing curse were very rare, and it had taken years of investigation and no little amount of luck for Tom to locate those survivors. Nearly all of those cases happened outside Europe, in countries where using the killing curse on another human was not listed as an unforgivable act that immediately warranted a life sentence in prison. It was in a small country that had just begun rebuilding after years of war that Tom had first stumbled upon a survivor of the killing curse – a witch whose husband had died in an attempt to save her from an enemy soldier. And from her, Tom had learned of a way to surviving the deadly curse.

Love. Self-sacrificing love. It was simple yet intriguing. And from what Tom had read about the incident in Godric's Hallow, he had no doubt that it had been the love of Lily Potter that had saved little Harry from the killing curse.

But Harry was not the only one who had survived that night. The killing curse had rebounded and Voldemort had been hit full-force by it. His body had been destroyed by the curse, but he had survived. How was that possible?

As far as Tom was concerned, there was only one answer.

While his research paper on the killing curse and the effect of self-sacrifice had shocked the world, no one but Albus Dumbledore knew that Tom had not listed all he knew in his publication. There was another way.

It was ironic that while pure love could triumph over death, so could pure evil.

Consciously, Tom reached up to his chest and rubbed the area where a scar of lightening bolt shape laid underneath his shirt.

A/N: Now that Friend or Foe is finished, I can start updating this story again. It has been two years since my last update and I am really sorry about it.

This is a really short chapter, I know. And yes, I have changed the story again (Though I doubt many of you would remember the original version after two years. Anyway, see my profile for details).

The next few chapters (longer chapters) are ready, but I still need a beta for this story. Anyone interested?

Chapter 4: Horace Slughorn

It had been four days since Tom's arrival, and he had spent most of those four days in Hogwarts' library, gathering as much information as he could about the world he was currently in.

Up until the point when Voldemort emerged as the leader of a group of dark wizards, most major events in this world had also occurred in Tom's world in an identical manner. Everything pointed to the fact that his choice – Voldemort's choice - was indeed the cause of all the differences between the two worlds. The realization that a single choice could change the whole world was disturbing, but perhaps not that surprising. Tom certainly possessed the power to do so, should he choose to.

But aside from that grim realization, Tom had also discovered something interesting. There were two minor inconsistencies between the two worlds that had occurred around the time when he was still in school. One curious difference was the trophy that had his name on it. Tom did not remember doing a service for Hogwarts in his school years that could have earned him a special award. Then there was Grindelwald. The former Dark Lord was defeated a whole year earlier in Tom's world. Grindelwald had little connection with Voldemort, so this slight inconsistency could mean nothing, but Tom doubted it.

What made Tom so famous in the researching field were his uncanny abilities to connect seemingly unrelated information with absurd, but usually accurate, hypothesis. He did not have enough information to form any conclusions yet, but his instinct told him that all those little inconsistencies were there for a reason.

Tom was determined to find out what that reason was. He wanted to know if it was really his choice that had made all the difference, or if there were more than just a simple decision.

The easiest way to verify everything was to simply compare stories with Albus, who usually knew much more than most. But unlike the Albus in his world, who trusted Tom more than he did anyone else, this Albus had no reason to trust Tom at all. And worse, this Albus was very curious about Tom's past. Knowing how secretive and demanding the old man could be if he wanted to, Tom wisely chose

to seek information from another source. And who better to ask than his favorite prey – his former head of house?

Albus had left Hogwarts early that morning on a personal errand. Knowing how closely the old man had been watching him in the past few days, Tom had taken that opportunity to do a little information gathering on his own without being monitored.

And that was why he now found himself standing in the village square of Budleigh Babberton. The village appeared to be deserted, but he knew it was not the case.

After many tracking spells, he finally managed to locate the latest residence of one Horace Slughorn. Apparently, Slughorn had been on a run for the past year, never staying in one place for more than a week. Tom suspected it had something to do with Voldemort, as everything seemed to be in this world, one way or another.

Slughorn had been the head of Slytherin when Tom was a student. Whenever Tom needed anything that had to involve a teacher, like getting permission into the restricted section of the library, it was always Slughorn that he had asked. If this world was anything like his, then Slughorn would be able to answer a lot of Tom's questions concerning his other-self.

Slughorn prided himself with having a hand in building up the successful careers of many high-standing wizards. But despite his obsession with his Slug Club, Slughorn was by no means a man who knew only to stand behind his powerful friends. No, Horace Slughorn's weapon was his knowledge. Not only was he knowledgeable in many aspects of the magical world, he also knew of many secrets that were best left forgotten. Slughorn generally hid his secrets well, but if you were one of his favorites, it was not hard at all to make him talk.

At least, that was the case if said favorite hadn't turned into a Dark Lord who had killed thousands.

On the bright side, though, this visit was definitely going to be fun. A mischievous glint flashed in Tom's eyes as he made his way down the narrow street, towards the house his old professor was currently residing in.

Slughorn's place was the perfect picture of a house that had just been raided. But Tom's shock upon entering the house had quickly turned into curiosity and mild amusement when he caught sight of an armchair in the middle of the room that screamed transfiguration.

Tom let his gaze sweep past the armchair to other parts of the house, deliberately giving his old professor an impression that he had not yet been discovered. Now that Slughorn was in his self-assured safe-zone, it was his chance to explain himself. Subtly, he waved his wand to ward the whole house and began his tale.

"I came across the term 'alternate universe' several years after I graduated from Hogwarts. Different universes are supposed to be closed off from each another, but I discovered that it is possible to open up a doorway between two worlds. After years of research, I decided to test my theory. Four days ago, I arrived at the edge of a forest and witnessed a meeting of a group of dark wizards and came face to face with their leader, who I later discovered is the current Dark Lord in this world."

Tom paused and glanced back at the unmoving armchair. Years of working close to Albus Dumbledore had trained Tom to think rationally, no matter how ridiculous the situation was.

"I am sure you have heard of the existence of alternate universes, Professor Slughorn. I am Tom Riddle from another world, not Voldemort," he said slowly, addressing his professor directly for the first time. "I mean you no harm. All I want is some information about this world." He paused. If this Slughorn was anything like the one in his world, then, dangerous or not, he would never pass up an opportunity to talk to a dimension traveler. A little more flattery should be enough to do the trick. "I know I shouldn't have bothered you like this, professor, but you are the only one with enough knowledge to answer my questions."

And with that, Tom stopped talking and waited. Sure enough, seconds later a wary Horace Slughorn stood in the place where the armchair had been. His hand was in his wand pocket, but at least he hadn't pulled it out yet, which was a good sign.

"Alternate universe?"

Tom nodded, smiling in a friendly manner.

"And you are not... him?"

"I am not Voldemort."

Slughorn shrugged at the name, making Tom frown. Despite what he had read in the past few days, he still couldn't believe that his other-self actually managed to make everyone afraid of that name. In a way, that was quite an impressive accomplishment.

"All you want is to talk, you say?"

"Yes."

Slughorn was still wary of him, which was understandable. But Tom still had other tricks up his sleeves.

"Do you happen to possess a pensieve, professor?"

Slughorn looked confused at the sudden inquiry.

"Pensieves cannot lie," Tom explained simply.

Slughorn blinked before understanding dawned on his face. He shot Tom another suspicious look, this time mixed with a hint of curiosity, then disappeared into an adjacent room and returned seconds later with a pensieve in his hands.

The fact that Slughorn had not taken this chance to escape made Tom believe that his previous story of dimension travelling had actually interested the Potions Master more than it appeared to be.

Once Slughorn had settled his pensieve between them, Tom pulled out his wand. Slughorn stiffened in alert, but Tom merely pointed his wand to his temple and pulled out a string of memory. Wordlessly, he put the memory into the pensieve and looked up at Slughorn.

"This is the memory of my encounter with one Lord Voldemort four days ago."

Slughorn's eyes widened in shock and no little amount of fear, but Tom knew that the man would not be able to resist.

Ten minutes later found a pale Horace Slughorn sitting before his fireplace with Tom sitting comfortably in an armchair across from him. Both of them had a glass of fire whisky in their hand.

"You have to tell me all about this experiment of yours, Tom." Slughorn looked amazed. "Dimension travel? Many wizards don't even believe that other worlds actually exist."

Tom smiled. "Maybe later, professor, there's something I'd like to ask you first."

"And what do you want to know? I've been living a quiet life since my retirement. I'm afraid I have since become quite ignorant of the happenings in the world." Slughorn was growing wary again.

Perhaps it would be easier if Slughorn was not as sober, but Tom could work around that.

"You'd never be ignorant of anything, we both know that, professor," said Tom. "I'm just curious to know what made the difference between the two worlds. I'm afraid that is something Hogwarts' library cannot tell me."

Slughorn looked surprised. "Hogwarts? You are staying at Hogwarts?"

"Albus was kind enough to let me stay there."

Slughorn chuckled. "I'm sure Albus received quite a shock when he saw you, eh?"

Tom nodded with a smirk at the memory. The fact that he could still shock the old man speechless from time to time after so many years, was an accomplishment that he was particularly proud of, even though the circumstances was more than a little uncomfortable this time.

"Actually," Tom began, "I was wondering if you could tell me anything about my counterpart."

Slughorn sighed. "I figured as much. But there really isn't much I can tell you. He's a bright one, no one would ever think of him as

anything but a perfect student. But you already knew that, didn't you?"

Tom forced a small smile. "Except I didn't turn out to be that perfect at all," he said quietly.

"I should have suspected something at that time, why else would he ask-" Slughorn cut himself off and shot Tom a fleeting glance at whatever slip he had almost made. The Potions Master shook his head. "There's really not much to tell. You should ask Albus for more details if you want."

Tom could tell that Slughorn had brought Dumbledore up just to distract him from enquiring what he had almost said. Deciding it was not necessary to press the old professor too hard, yet, Tom let Slughorn lead him to another topic, one that he had actually been waiting to ask.

"I've read from several books that Albus is the only one that Voldemort fears."

Slughorn shrugged again at the name. "I suppose it is to be expected. Albus is the only one who can rival him in terms of power after all."

Tom leaned forward slightly. "But there's more, isn't it?"

Slughorn looked uncomfortable. "I think Albus is probably the first one who suspected anything. None of us had any idea what kind of danger To-" He glanced over at Tom and snorted. "This is going to be confusing," he muttered, shaking his head again. "As I was saying, Albus seemed to have guessed even then what... he would turn out to be. Albus used to be quite hard on him, too, especially after a student was killed in that Chamber incident."

Tom frowned. Something seemed different

"Ah, you wouldn't have known, would you?" said Slughorn, now looking quite pleased despite what they were discussing, most likely because the retired professor missed having someone who was eager to listen to his tales.

Tom, on the other hand, shared none of his former professor's enthusiasm. Like his counterpart, he had also opened the Chamber of Secrets and set the deadly Basilisk upon the whole school in his fifth year.

Tom doubted Slughorn would appreciate the similarity between the two worlds, so he played his part as an interested audience as Slughorn filled him in on what had happened fifty years ago. Knowing what to expect, Tom managed to mask his expressions when Slughorn mentioned the death of Myrtle.

"No one suspected a thing. Of course, who would have thought?" said Slughorn, more to himself.

Tom's breath caught as he realized just what was wrong. "He was never caught?" he asked urgently.

Slughorn shook his head, "A student got blamed for that. The truth didn't come out until around three years ago."

Tom froze. No one had found out the truth until three years ago?

"Something the matter, Tom?"

Tom turned his attention back to his old professor. "My counterpart received an award for special school service," he said slowly. "Is it related to this incident?"

"Ah yes, Tom got that award for catching the responsible student," said Slughorn. "Framing, I'm afraid to say."

"And that student?" Tom asked wearily. He remembered that day clearly. Albus had dragged him straight to Dippet before he'd had the chance to frame anyone.

"That's Hagrid. He was expelled, of course, but Albus let him stay at Hogwarts as gamekeeper. I think Albus might've already known the truth then, but that's just a guess. It was a long time ago after all." Slughorn waved his hand dismissively, unwilling to go any further into the subject.

Noticing Slughorn's discomfort, Tom decided he had learned enough for the day. It would do him no good to drive Slughorn away

with too many questions, when the professor just barely trusted Tom not to kill him.

Pushing aside the information he had just learned for later thoughts, Tom took a sip from his glass of wine and leaned back in his chair. "Say, Professor Slughorn, you said you want to know the theory behind this little experiment of mine, didn't you?"

Walking back to Hogwarts alone that night, Tom's thoughts kept returning to his conversation with Slughorn about the Chamber of Secrets. Was it the answer? Could it really be that simple?

His thoughts were interrupted, however, when an odd feeling suddenly swept over him. He felt as though something inside him had died. No, not something inside him, but something from the outside... like a bond he shared with someone else had been severed abruptly.

He stopped in the track, but the feeling had already disappeared. His mind raced for a possible explanation of what had just happened. The feeling seemed to have come from within him, but what could have triggered it? Was it a side-effect of dimension travelling? This shouldn't have happened, but it might be worth the effort to go through his research notes once more.

Lost in his thoughts, it had taken him longer than usual to reach Hogwarts. But before he could even step into the Entrance Hall, a blinding red flame flashed before him, blocking his way.

"Fawkes?"

The phoenix perched on Tom's shoulder and let out a soft cry.

Tom's hand automatically reached up to pat the phoenix. "Do you want to tell me something? A message from Albus?"

In response, Fawkes suddenly took off and flew across the Hall, towards the direction of the headmaster's office. Sensing something was wrong, Tom hastily chased after the phoenix.

"Sugar Quill." Tom called out once he reached the gargoyle and ran up the spiral stairs leading to Dumbledore's office. The office door

was closed, but the distinct feeling of dark magic coming from inside the room was unmistakable.

Cautiously, Tom pushed the door open. His gaze was quickly drawn to the figure lying on the ground.

"Albus!"

He reached Albus' side in no time. The old wizard's breathing was strained and he looked as though he was struggling just to stay awake. Tom's gaze flickered to the two objects lying next to Albus.

A sword and a broken ring - Marvolo Gaunt's ring.

Chapter 5: The Ring

Keeping a safe distance away from the broken ring, which was reeked with dark magic, Tom carefully lifted Albus up and supported him to the nearby couch. A look at Albus' blackened hand left no doubt in his mind, that Albus had just been cursed by dark magic.

"Albus? Can you hear me?"

Albus did not respond. His eyes were shut tight and his face was pale. With growing concern, Tom began to run through a series of diagnosis spells on the blackened hand. Whatever curse was causing the damage, it was spreading fast and weakening Albus at a dangerous rate. To Tom's frustration, he was unable to identify the curse, which seemed to be an unusual mix of Dark Arts. Before he knew what kind of magic had been used, he dared not attempt to counter the curse. The best he could hope for now was to stop the curse from spreading.

Reluctantly accepting what he knew was the only option, Tom quickly set out to work. He pointed his wand near Albus' arm and carefully pushed the curse back with his magic. He worked slowly with great caution. The key to suppressing a dark curse was to move as subtly as possible, so as to avoid triggering any defense mechanisms that the curse might have against unexpected attacks.

He did not know how much time had passed, but in the end he managed to trap the curse in Albus' hand. It would not be trapped forever, but it could at least buy them some time.

"Tom?"

Tom looked up to find Albus slowly opening his eyes. His voice was too weak for Tom's liking.

"How are you feeling, Albus?" he asked.

"I need... Severus."

That was not what Tom had expected. "Severus Snape?"

Hadn't Snape left Hogwarts a few days ago? What did he have to do with this?

Albus was insistent. "Spinner's End," he croaked, trying to get up.

Tom sighed, suppressing the urge to roll his eyes. "I will floo him," he said. Then he added sternly, "Now lie back down."

Tom walked over to the fireplace and threw a handful of floo powder into the fire.

"Spinner's End," he called out, echoing what Albus had just said.

Seconds later, Snape's scowling face appeared at the other side of the green flames.

Knowing that he was supposed to have never met the man before, Tom asked the obvious. "Severus Snape?"

Snape's face was guarded. "And you are...?"

It was not the time for a lengthy explanation, so instead of answering the question, Tom cut right to the point.

"Albus Dumbledore was injured. He calls for you."

Snape's face revealed nothing but suspicion, and Tom had to admit it was not at all unfounded. Knowing from experience that the quickest way to solve the problem was to let the situation explain itself, he stepped aside, allowing Snape to have a full view of the headmaster's office. Snape's gaze quickly found the figure lying on the couch.

"Dumbledore," he muttered. His gaze lingered for a little longer, before he turned around and disappeared from Tom's view without another word.

Snape returned seconds later with an armful of potions. Without pausing, he stepped through the fire into the headmaster's office and swept past Tom to Albus' side, putting down his load of potions on a small table.

Albus had once again slipped back into unconsciousness. Even though the curse in his hand was now under control, he was still greatly weakened by it.

"What happened?" Snape demanded, glaring at Tom.

Once again, Tom reminded himself that he was the outsider and that Snape was the one Dumbledore himself had called for. He could at least try to be the civil one here.

"I believe Albus was cursed when he tried to wear that ring." Tom motioned to the broken ring on the ground. "He was nearly unconscious when I found him."

Snape uncorked a vial of potion and began pouring it into Albus' mouth. He glanced at the ring, then at Albus' hand. "You trapped the curse," he commented shortly, pulling out his wand with his free hand.

"With the state Albus is in, attempting to break the curse might kill him instantly," said Tom with a hint of warning.

Snape shot him another glare. "What do you take me for, a fool?" he snapped.

Tom ignored the comment and watched closely as Snape checked Albus' condition. The sneer on Snape's face deepened as he worked. Minutes later he finally lowered his wand in obvious annoyance.

Still with an angry sneer, he turned to Tom. "Monitor his condition, I will be back shortly." Without waiting for a reply, Snape whirled around and walked towards the fireplace, where he flooed back to Spinner's End, most likely to fetch more potions supplies.

Despite the situation, Tom couldn't help but stare after the Potions Master curiously. Snape had indeed looked concerned over Albus' condition. Even though the rude and distrusting characteristics of Snape's were still there, Tom could also see that inside the cold demeanor lived a man that was different from the cruel and unfeeling Severus Snape in his world.

As for how different that was, Tom did not know, but he supposed giving the man the benefit of the doubt was the least he could do.

He snorted slightly at the thought. Benefit of the doubt indeed, as if his other self wasn't a Dark Lord.

Shaking his head, Tom focused back on Albus. Even though Albus was still unconscious, his condition was significantly better than moments ago. But it was still far from over. If the curse could not be broken in time, Albus would be killed.

Locking away his worries for the moment, Tom looked around for more information on what had caused the whole mess. It was obvious that the ring was the source of the curse, even though the dark magic in it had lost much of its intensity by now.

But what in Salazar's name had Albus been doing with that ring? Albus had disappeared for the whole day, supposedly on a 'personal errand'. Could he have been searching for this ring on purpose? Was it because of the Resurrection Stone?

In his world, that ring had come to Tom's possession after Morfin Gaunt's death. He had checked the ring thoroughly himself, and he was certain that the ring did not contain any kind of curses. The ring in this world had obviously been tampered with, but why?

The flame in the fireplace turned green at that moment and out stepped Snape, with a steaming goblet in his hand. Pushing away his thoughts, Tom stepped aside as Snape approached the couch and poured the thick golden liquid into Albus' mouth. If there was one thing that Tom was certain about Severus Snape, it was his absolute talent in Potions. If Snape really intended to help, then Albus would regain his strength in no time.

Sure enough, seconds after the whole goblet had been drained, Albus began to show signs of regaining consciousness.

"Why? Why did you wear the ring?" Snape demanded as soon as Albus opened his eyes. Tom raised his eyebrows in surprise. "You know it carries a curse, surely you realized that. Why even touch it?"

Albus grimaced. "I... was a fool. Sorely tempted..."

"Tempted by what?"

"You wanted to use it, didn't you?" Tom cut in with a quiet voice. He knew Albus had always yearned for his family's forgiveness. "You wanted to meet them again."

Albus paled visibly and stared at Tom in shock. His reaction was so huge that Tom regretted saying the last part out loud. Even Snape looked surprised at what Tom's statement had provoked.

"How?" asked Albus softly.

Tom was not sure if Albus meant how he knew of the Dumbledores' family history or how he knew the ring was one of the Deathly Hallows. Either way, the answer was the same.

"You told me."

A flash of surprise crossed Albus' eyes before his face softened, looking tired again all of a sudden.

"What is this all about?" Snape had been watching the exchange with narrowed eyes.

Albus sighed. "It was a mistake, Severus."

Snape snarled, looking furious. "Mistake!" he spat. "Is that what you call it? The ring carried a curse of extraordinary power, to contain it is all we can hope for." He paused and glanced at Tom with his usual suspicion.

Albus raised his useless hand and examined it with open curiosity, but Tom could see that his mind was actually going through all kinds of consequences that this might cause.

"You have both done well." Albus smiled gently. "How much time do I have?"

"At most a year and a half if we can't break the curse," answered Tom tightly.

"And you don't believe there is a way." It was not a question.

The researcher in Tom leaped up indignantly. "The curse was designed in a way that makes removing it very difficult," he said, "but it is entirely too early to say it is-"

"Please, you saw the curse yourself," Snape cut in, scowling at Tom. "It is unbreakable."

"That is enough. I was lucky to have you both," said Albus, stopping the argument. "Besides, this does make things easier, does it not?" He glanced at Snape before turning to Tom. "Tom? If you don't mind, I would like to discuss a few things with Severus here."

Tom wanted to tell Albus to rest instead of jumping right back to work, but he refrained himself from saying anything.

"I'll take my leave then."

With a nod at the occupants in the room, Tom left the office. He was curious to know what Albus was discussing with Snape, but there was nothing he could do if Albus wanted to withhold information from him. The fact that Albus trusted Snape more than him was ironic to say the least.

Not feeling up to returning to his room, Tom headed straight to the Astronomy Tower. After the eventful day, he needed a quiet place to think things through. And nothing could calm him better, than the peaceful sight of Hogwarts' grounds at night.

Severus stared at Albus in disbelief. How could he ask that from him? How dared he?

"And my soul, Dumbledore? Mine?"

"You alone know whether it will harm your soul to help an old man avoid pain and humiliation," said Dumbledore. "I ask this one, great favor of you, Severus, because death is coming for me as surely as the Chudley Cannons will finish bottom in this year's league."

Severus tuned off the rest of Dumbledore's babbling. Inside him a cold fire was burning in rage. It was at time like this that he absolutely loathed Dumbledore. All these years, no matter how much he had done for the man, Dumbledore would always ask for more.

But that was what he had chosen years ago... for Lily. He met Dumbledore's piercing blue eyes for a long moment, then nodded curtly.

"Thank you, Severus."

Dumbledore looked satisfied, his eyes twinkling annoyingly as they always did. For a moment, Severus wondered if the man truly understood what he had asked of him. He abandoned that thought easily; it wouldn't have made a difference either way.

"Who is that man?" asked Severus as silence fell upon them. "He is the one the Dark Lord wants, isn't he?"

Dumbledore nodded. "Unfortunately," he said. "But I'm not surprised that Voldemort would want to meet him."

"Who is he?" Severus pressed. "He appeared at Hogwarts just the day before the Dark Lord made him a prime target."

"His name is Tom," said Dumbledore simply. "His arrival was unexpected, yet intriguing. I know you are suspicious, Severus, but I think it is now obvious that he is not working for Voldemort. And he has told me enough for me to believe, that he has nothing to do with the war."

Severus was no fool. He knew there was more to the man than that. Why else would the Dark Lord be so interested in him? Why else would Dumbledore let him stay at Hogwarts? Something about this 'Tom' made Severus uneasy even though he knew he had never met him until a few days ago in front of Hogwarts' gates.

"He seems to know a lot about what you were doing."

"Does he?"

Severus growled. "You know what I am talking about, Dumbledore. He knew what that ring meant and what you tried to do with it. You have never thought to share that information with me, not even the reason of why you needed to search for the ring. Yet you shared it with a stranger?"

"Now, Severus, you should know me well enough to know that I would do no such thing. Tom knew more about this ring than I expected, but him having that knowledge should not interfere with any of our plans-

"Your plans, you mean."

"Severus-

"You refuse to tell me anything, yet you expect that small service of me," Severus snarled. "You take a great deal for granted, Dumbledore. What made you think I would-

"You gave me your word, Severus," said Dumbledore firmly, his eyes boring into Severus' own.

Severus glared at the old man with unmasked animosity, but Dumbledore was unaffected.

"Now is not the time." Dumbledore sighed. "When the time comes, which should not be long, judging from what happened tonight, I will tell you." he said with a tone that suggested the matter was closed until 'the time came'.

Severus gritted his teeth, but he knew nothing, not even death, could make Albus Dumbledore reveal his secrets unless the man felt like sharing.

Suppressing his frustration with an effort, Severus turned around and strode over to the fireplace. With this emergency call from Dumbledore, his potions at Spinner's End would have been ruined by now.

As he called out his destination and watched the flame turn green, Severus thought of the rat that was currently taking residence in his house. He fingered the wand in his pocket. Oh, yes, someone would suffer from his rage tonight.

A/N: Not a particularly interesting chapter, since nothing really changes from Canon... yet.

Tom's past is an important part of this story, so... you'll just have to wait and find out. All I can say right now is that the Chamber of

Secrets incident is (in a way) the turning point. You will find out what I mean in the next chapter.

Chapter 6: The Only One He Ever Fears

The Astronomy Tower had always been Tom's favorite spot in the school. The Chamber of Secrets was a close second, especially when he wanted to be left alone – Albus almost always knew where to find him - or simply just wanted to lash out with his magic until he was too exhausted to think. The latter was tempting right now, but he had had enough excitement for the day and had no wish to deal with whatever he might find in this world's Chamber of Secrets.

Using every shortcut that he knew of, Tom reached the top of the Astronomy Tower in no time. He took in a deep breath and closed his eyes, opening himself to the ancient magic surrounding the castle. It was a familiar feeling, soothing and comforting. To have such a close connection with Hogwarts was one of the privileges of being a founder's heir that Tom had shamelessly abused over the years. Whenever he was deeply troubled, like he was now, Hogwarts would always offer the support that he so needed.

The horror of what had just happened in the Headmaster's office finally began to fade. Unable to stop himself, Tom selfishly took comfort in the fact that the Albus he knew, was currently safe and sound in another world. It was this fact that had allowed him to refrain from showing the same kind of pain and frustration that Snape had shown earlier in the office.

If Voldemort were to see him now, Tom mused, the Dark Lord would no doubt feel disgusted at this display of 'weakness'. Tom would have felt the same, but he had long learned, that while letting others into his life might at times make him weak, or even vulnerable, the rewards were well worth the sacrifices. And for a Slytherin, it was all that mattered.

Feeling much calmer than moments ago, Tom slowly opened his eyes and walked closer to the edge of the tower so he could take in the full view of Hogwarts' grounds. Finally able to relax after the eventful day, Tom let his mind wander.

It had only been a few days since his arrival and already he was beginning to hate this world. Then again, it was not easy to feel at home in a world that was currently at war, with his counterpart as the main villain.

Tom wondered what the Albus in his world would think if he knew what he had prevented years ago. Albus would probably insist, as he always did, that it was Tom's choice that had made all the difference, but Tom knew better. True, it had been his choice to turn back, to abandon his dark ambition, but it was Albus who had shown him that choice.

For him, everything started in the summer before his sixth year, when he was finally allowed to stay at Hogwarts during holidays. It had been Albus' idea, and the reason that the professor had gone out of his way to convince Dippet into letting Tom stay at school had quickly become apparent – Albus had wanted to save him.

That summer had been the beginning. All through Tom's last two years at Hogwarts, Albus had refused to leave him alone, relentlessly trying to pull him back from the road he had long chosen for himself.

At one time, Tom had been puzzled by Albus' change in behavior towards him, but now he understood. Since the Chamber incident, Albus had gotten to know him quite well; well enough to see just how close he had been to becoming the next Dark Lord. Albus had blamed himself for what he had unknowingly allowed Tom to become - a power-craving monster. And being Albus Dumbledore, he had taken matters into his own hands.

After his earlier conversation with Slughorn, Tom suspected that this might just be the difference between the two worlds.

In this world, Tom's role in the Chamber incident fifty years ago had not been revealed until recently. Albus' suspicion about him had never been confirmed, and Albus never had any reason to interfere with his life.

In Tom's world, however, everything had changed the day Albus caught him opening the Chamber and forced him to pay for his crime.

Tom could feel the gaze of all three professors in the room focused on him. Slughorn was sitting on his left, Dumbledore on his right. Dippet, the headmaster, was sitting across from him behind the desk. Dumbledore had proved to be more troublesome than Tom had originally assumed.

"Surely you are not serious, Albus," said Slughorn, frowning. "Opening the Chamber of Secrets? Tom would never do that."

"This must be a misunderstanding, sir," said Tom, turning to Dumbledore. "Rumors said that the monster once belonged to Salazar Slytherin. I don't think a monster like that would listen to the order of a half-blood, sir."

"I have reason to believe that the monster is a Basilisk," said Dumbledore calmly. "And I believe you are a parselmouth, Mr. Riddle?"

The disbelief in Dippet's voice was clear. "Is that true?"

Tom knew he should never have told Dumbledore his ability to speak to snakes when he first met the professor in the orphanage.

"Yes, sir," he answered truthfully, knowing there was no use denying it. "Had I known that monster was a Basilisk, I would have tried to help." He lowered his gaze and continued quietly, adding a suitable amount of sadness and guilt into his voice, "With my ability, I might've been able to stop it and no one would have died."

"Nonsense, Tom," Slughorn cut in sharply, "you couldn't have known."

"Professor Dumbledore," said Dippet, "This is a serious accusation, and I am afraid I cannot accept it without any proof."

Tom knew he was in a safe zone then. Dippet might trust Dumbledore, but with Tom's perfect record in the school, Dumbledore would need more than just verbal accusation. And Tom knew for certain that there was no evidence, he had made sure of that.

Tom looked up and met the transfiguration professor's gaze for the first time. The piercing blue eyes were looking straight at him. Unconsciously, Tom held his breath. He did not know why he felt as though everything hinged on this moment. Something in Dumbledore's eyes told him that things were about to change.

"I believe, headmaster," Dumbledore held Tom's gaze a moment longer before turning back to Dippet, "considering how grave this matter is, we should look deeper into Mr. Riddle's claim."

Tom carefully kept his face blank. So Dumbledore was determined to get the truth out of him. That was a bold but foolish move, what could the professor possibly do?

"I suggest questioning Mr. Riddle under Veritaserum."

Tom's eyes widened marginally. He carefully kept his shock and sudden anxiousness from showing.

"What? Are you even aware of what you are suggesting, Albus?"

Slughorn looked as though he thought Dumbledore had gone insane, but the pair of cold blue eyes told Tom, that Dumbledore knew exactly what he was doing. Dippet seemed to have come to the same conclusion. The headmaster rubbed the bridge of his nose wearily.

"We will have to contact the Ministry, if we are to administer Veritaserum on a student." He glanced at Tom, then back at Dumbledore. "I do hope you realize what you are doing, my friend."

"It is my responsibility to protect the children in this school, Armando," said Dumbledore. His voice was grave but determined. "If, by my misjudgment, I have wrongly subjected one of my students to harm, I will willingly resign my post."

Tom stared at his transfiguration professor in disbelief. Dumbledore was betting his career and reputation just to accuse him?

"If you are sure, Albus," Dippet's low voice broke the stunned silence.

Both Dippet and Slughorn understood just what Dumbledore was doing, and neither dared questioning him any further. Had it been a different situation, Tom would have been impressed by the power Dumbledore was currently showing.

"I am, headmaster," said Dumbledore firmly. Then he once again turned back to Tom. "You have been following our conversations, I believe, Mr. Riddle?"

Tom smiled slightly as he thought back on how much he had changed since the time Albus managed to make him confess to his own crime fifty years ago. Albus had left him with no choice then; there was no way he would have let himself questioned under Veritaserum. With no other alternative, he had confessed to what he had done with slight alterations so as to make the whole incident sound like an unfortunate accident.

Unlike Hagrid in this world, Tom had not been expelled. Being on good terms with almost all professors in the school had had its merits. After the incident, there had been a lengthy discussion between all staff members and, since a death was involved, a few officials from the Ministry. Most of the staff had been inclined to give their perfect student 'a second chance'. As a result, instead of expulsion, Tom had been assigned to serve detentions with his most hated professor for a whole year. There had been voices of concerns from parents, of course, but with the lack of further attack and the recovery of those who had been paralyzed, school life had slowly returned to normal. For Tom and Albus, however, life had taken a very interesting turn, though neither of them had realized it at that time.

Tom still remembered those nights he had been forced to spend in detentions with Albus clearly. He had little trouble with writing lines or cleaning classrooms, but having to show obedience to the man he had by then loathed almost as much as his muggle father had really pushed him to his limit. For his part, Albus had been as strict as ever, watching Tom closely all the time with a cold gaze.

Given the amount of time they had spent in each other's presence, it probably should not have been a surprise when, somewhere along the line, things began to change. Two weeks after Tom had begun serving his detentions - with perfect attendance and performance - the tense silence that had always accompanied them had been broken by Albus' attempt to start a conversation.

Before long, Tom had not only gotten used to his new schedule of spending most of his free time with his transfiguration professor, but also to the small talks they usually had during detentions. Their conversations had centered mostly on the Chamber incident at first, then slowly moved on to more casual topics, like transfiguration or school life in general.

Tom had handled all those conversations with caution, treating them as means to gather information on the school. But soon he had begun to notice some changes, not in himself, but in Albus.

Around two months since the Chamber incident, Tom had suddenly found his professor offering him sweets at the beginning of every detention. At the same time, Albus had also stopped regarding him with his usual suspicious and piercing gaze. Instead, the coldness in his blue eyes had slowly melted away, replaced by a thoughtful and oddly regretful look.

It was also during that time that Tom had first been introduced to the wide world of researching. Detentions had gotten much more interesting then.

Tom strengthened his Occlumency shields out of habit as he walked down the now familiar corridor. He stopped before the door leading to Dumbledore's office but didn't bother raising his hand to knock, knowing it was not necessary since-

Sure enough, before he could even finish his thought, the door before him had swung open. Vowing to find out how Dumbledore did that someday, Tom entered the room and gently closed the door behind him.

"Right on time, as always."

Tom looked up to see Dumbledore smiling at him, his eyes twinkling in a way that could only mean he knew something that Tom didn't.

"Lemon drops?"

"No thanks, sir," Tom replied almost automatically. "What would you have me do today, professor?"

Dumbledore's smile widened. He walked over a book shelf near the wall and pulled out four heavy tomes. Balancing all four books in his arms perilously, he walked over to the extra desk by the side of the room, where Tom had spent time writing parchment after parchment of lines the previous month.

"Your job today, and for the rest of this week, I believe, is to read through these."

Not knowing what to make of this unusual task from Dumbledore, Tom walked over to the small desk. He scanned the titles of the books and immediately knew what they were for.

Those books were all about Dumbledore's most recent research topic. Tom had read through Dumbledore's personal notes on the topic when he was cleaning what he suspected was the professor's research lab a week ago.

"Do you want me to write you a summary, sir?"

"Ah, but we are not in class, Tom," said Dumbledore. "Besides, I think you know very well what you should be looking for in those books."

Tom carefully kept his face blank. So Dumbledore knew, or at least suspected, that he had done more than just cleaning. Not that he would admit to anything.

"Do you have anything you wish to tell me?"

The feeling of being cornered by Dumbledore in the headmaster's office came back at once to Tom. But unlike the intimidating, almost suffocating, presence that had forced Tom to confess more than a month ago, the professor seemed merely curious.

"No, sir."

The smile never left Dumbledore's face. "Very well," he said, tapping his wand on a piece of blank parchment lying next to the books.

Tom glanced as texts began to fill the parchment, creating as an exact copy of one of the research notes he had already read.

"This should give you an idea of what I want you to do." He pointed at the stack of books. "The book at the top contains all the basic information you need to know. The other three are more advanced, but you should have no problem understanding them. Do you have any questions?"

"No, sir."

"Good, good. Now let us get to work."

Sitting in his usual chair in the common room, Tom flipped through his book idly while half-listening to the argument between Malfoy and Rosier, two fellow Slytherins that always followed him around.

He scanned through the text describing the theory of object-animal transfiguration without paying much attention. He had already memorized all of-

He stopped. Something in his mind clicked. He went back several pages and read through the whole chapter again, this time paying attention to all the details. With growing excitement, he quickly pulled out two more books from his bag, cross-referencing them with the book he had been reading.

The two boys beside him had by now stopped talking and were looking at him with interest.

"What is it, Tom?"

"What have you foun-"

Without looking up from his book, Tom raised his hand, silencing them at once. Several minutes later, he closed his books with a smirk on his face.

"I will return by dinner," he told the two Slytherins. "Do remind the others of the meeting tonight. We have planning to do and I do not want anyone to be late, understand?"

Malfoy smirked. "Perfectly, Voldemort."

Tom gave him a small nod of acknowledgement before gathering his books and leaving the common room. He reached Dumbledore's office within fifteen minutes.

He knocked. "Professor Dumbledore?"

The door swung open after a few seconds and Tom slipped inside quickly.

"Tom?" Dumbledore looked surprised to see him. They didn't have any detention scheduled that day.

Walking quickly across the room to Dumbledore's desk, Tom pulled out the book from his bag and flipped it to the page that had caught his attention earlier.

"Take a look at this, sir." Tom set down the opened book on the desk and pushed it towards Dumbledore, pointing at the lower section of the right page.

Dumbledore raised an eyebrow at him before turning his attention to the book. Tom could tell the exact moment the professor managed to make the connection himself.

"Well done, Tom" Dumbledore beamed at him. A look Tom had seen many times before in Slughorn's eyes, but never in Dumbledore's, was now clearly visible in the pair of twinkling blue eyes, directing at him - pride.

Tom felt a strange sense of contentment at the praise. He had to admit that working with Dumbledore on his research projects was enjoyable.

It was a shame, really, because the professor had no place in Tom's plan for the future.

Things went on in a similar manner for the rest of Tom's fifth year, with him assisting Albus with his various projects. Then summer arrived, and Albus had stepped up his actions.

To his surprise, Albus had brought him all over the country during that summer, trying to show him that there was more to life than power, that heritage and blood meant nothing, if one did not understand the meaning of love.

If Albus had reached out to him a few years earlier, Tom probably would have listened, but Albus had been way too late.

By the time of his fifth year, Tom had already been well on his way to becoming 'Voldemort' – a name he had used among those he had arrogantly considered his 'followers'. He had made plans to take

control of the wizarding world. He had even considered – with great excitement - to perform the darkest magic ever existed in exchange for the so-called 'immortality'. He had been too far gone for Albus to simply pull him back.

Tom reached up his hand to the scar in his chest. No, it had taken much more than Albus' effort to turn him back.

A shiver ran through him as he thought back on that particular chapter in his life. He shook his head. His past was not a pleasant place to dwell on for too long. Though considering what had just happened in Dumbledore's office earlier, the reality – this reality, at least – was not utopia either.

Why had Albus sought out that ring? Why did the ring carry a deadly curse? What had happened in Albus' office before Tom's arrival? And what could have caused that strange feeling of emptiness that had suddenly assaulted Tom before he reached Hogwarts that night?

The questions were endless, but something told Tom that all were connected. Not only to the war and whatever was happening in this world, but also to his own dark past.

He smirked grimly. Things were getting interesting. And he had a feeling that his questions would be answered very soon, whether he – or Albus - liked it or not.

Chapter 7: Equal

Hogwarts's library was known for its vast collections. There were books from all kinds of subjects, from Transfiguration to Healing to History. There were also invaluable tomes from the age of the Founders that could not be found anywhere else. During school year, it was not hard to find students, usually Ravenclaws, studying in the library until late in the evening, leaving only when Madam Pince declared that the library was closed for the day.

Of course, now that Madam Pince had gone home for the holidays, any rules concerning the library's opening and closing hours had naturally become non-existent. Not that his guest cared much for rules in the first place, thought Albus in amusement as he glanced at the figure currently leaning across one of the many library tables, fast asleep.

It was a strange sight indeed. The Tom Riddle that Albus knew was always prepared, always wary of his surroundings. Albus couldn't remember ever seeing Tom letting down his guard, not even when he was a child.

Albus walked closer and glanced at the books piled up on Tom's table. They were all books on advanced curse-breaking. And there was only one possible reason of why Tom would be researching this particular subject.

Albus looked down at his blackened hand and back to the peacefully sleeping form of Tom Riddle. This was... unexpected, but it probably shouldn't have surprised him, judging from what he had seen of Tom in the past few days. He shook his head with a sad smile, wondering once again how his counterpart had managed to gain Tom Riddle's loyalty.

For a moment Albus thought about waking up the younger man, then decided against it. Casting a quick silencing charm on himself, he slowly walked away and headed towards the transfiguration section.

Tom woke to the smell of bacon and eggs, as well as a familiar sound of chuckling. He slowly pushed himself up, squinting at the sudden brightness before focusing on the twinkling blue eyes of Albus Dumbledore, who had taken a seat across from him.

"It's not polite to stare, Albus," he said dryly, noticing the unmasked amusement on the old wizard's face and feeling more than a little annoyed at Hogwarts for not waking him up.

"Good morning, Tom," said Albus pleasantly. "I'm afraid you just missed breakfast."

Tom glanced at the huge plate of food that had somehow materialized beside him while he was sleeping. "Irma Pince is going to chase you down for bringing food into her precious library." He smirked at the mental picture. "But thank you anyway."

"Ah, I must consider myself lucky that she is currently spending the summer with her family then," said Albus. "I would hate to meet an unfortunate end before my remaining time is over."

Tom stiffened. Then he glared at Albus. "Must you joke about your own death?"

"I am well aware of the nature of this curse, Tom," Albus replied calmly, motioning to his withered hand, "as are you, I'm sure. I appreciate what you are trying to do, but we both know that nothing can further delay my inevitable death."

"Inevitable death," Tom repeated with a hint of contempt slipped into his voice. "So you are just going to accept it as though there's nothing wrong with your life being cut short? And by a curse of all things!"

"I am not afraid of death, Tom. And there is indeed nothing wrong, as you put it, with dying," said Albus solemnly, eyeing Tom through his half-moon spectacles. "After all, death is-"

"- but the next great adventure," finished Tom with a sigh, knowing Albus' favorite saying by heart.

But how could one know for sure? Tom thought to himself. After all, 'adventures' came in all shapes and forms. How could one guarantee-

"I see you don't believe it," Albus commented, looking mildly interested for some reason.

"I don't," Tom answered shortly with a tone that suggested the matter was closed. He had no intention to engage in a discussion of possible after-life with Albus Dumbledore, at least not this one. "But great adventures aside," he went on before Albus could say anything, "I'm not going to give up finding a cure just because you seem to have already admitted defeat."

Albus nodded in acknowledgement. "Very well."

Tom could tell that Albus had already expected him to fail. He suppressed his irritation and reminded himself that it would not be proper to curse this Albus, who he had technically met for no more than a week, for being annoyingly self-righteous.

He ran a hand through his hair and let out a frustrated breath. "I doubt you came here just to argue with me about your death, Albus," he said.

"Indeed," Albus nodded. "I understand that you are reluctant to tell me about your past, Tom. But as you are aware, we are currently at war with Lord Voldemort, your counterpart in this world."

"Let me guess, you believe that my past can somehow assist you in dealing with your Tom Riddle?" asked Tom with a tone between sarcasm and exasperation.

Albus smiled. "Yes, Tom, that is what I believe," he said. "I admit that I'm very curious about you and your world myself, but I'm telling the truth when I say that the key to winning this war may very well be lying in Voldemort's past, which is, to a certain extent, your past."

The firm conviction in Albus' voice as he compared Tom's past to Voldemort's would have been insulting, had it been anything but the truth.

"What makes you so certain that I once shared a similar past with your dark lord?" asked Tom, curious as to what Albus had already found out about him. "For all you know, I may have had a completely different upbringing than this world's Tom Riddle."

"Just an old professor's intuition, you may say," Albus answered, still smiling, "as well as a few clues I've picked up from our previous

conversations. I believe you too have once walked the path that Voldemort has taken?"

Tom nodded, knowing that there was no point in denying it. "Voldemort only ceased to exist in my world around the time I graduated from Hogwarts," he said quietly.

Albus looked surprised. "I must say, that was later than I expected," he commented. "But that also means your knowledge on Voldemort's past is even more significant than I previously assumed."

Tom didn't like the direction this conversation was taking, though he had to admit that Albus did have a point. After all, one did not become a dark lord over-night. To achieve his dark ambition, Tom had made many plans in secret while he was still a student. If the point that separated the two worlds was indeed the Chamber of Secrets incident fifty years ago, then it was logical to assume that those plans – or at least similar ones – also existed in this world. Tom had abandoned the majority of his plans eventually, but he could still remember all of them in details. Albus wanted to know Voldemort's secrets, and what better way to gain that knowledge than to take it directly from another Tom Riddle?

But while Albus probably did have the best of intentions, Tom knew better than to let the old man have too much power over him.

"Tell me what you've already figured out and I'll try my best to fill in the rest for you." He raised an eyebrow at Albus' frown. "If you truly expect me to just tell you my life story without knowing what you're going to do with it, then you are sorely mistaken, Albus."

Albus stared at him for a long while. "I see," he said finally. "Know that, however, your knowledge on Voldemort may become the key to ending this war for us, should you choose to share it."

Tom met Albus' gaze steadily, unmoved by what he had just said. "No, Albus, the choice is in your hands, not mine," he said. "You may tell me what you already know and I will assist you, or you may search for what you want on your own. I'm sure you can manage even without the extra help of someone from another universe." He paused, smirked at the expressions on Albus' face, then motioned

innocently to the forgotten breakfast on the table. "Shall we share it, Albus?"

Having enough of Hogwarts and its headmaster for the day, Tom fled to Diagon Alley that afternoon. Even though he was well aware of the current war, he still had a hard time believing the state that Diagon Alley had been reduced to in this world. The streets were half-deserted and posters from the Ministry were everywhere. Tom found it quite disturbing to see the faces of his friends snarling out from wanted posters.

Walking down the street, he could spot a number of shabby-looking stalls selling all kinds of magical artifacts. He stopped by the stall selling amulets that claimed to have the power to ward against all curses except the Unforgivables. A grim-looking witch greeted him with a grin, but Tom merely spared the amulets a glance before walking away in disappointment; even his OWLs students could do a better job than that.

Near Gringotts, a group of anxious-looking shoppers passed by Tom, but they paid him no attention as they hurried along the street. According to Albus, only a handful of people actually knew who Voldemort used to be, even fewer could recognize his face. For once, Tom thanked his counterpart for sparing him the trouble of wearing a disguise.

In contrast to the quiet groups moving intently about their business on the street, Tom took his time, comparing this Diagon Alley to the one in his world. The shops were mostly where he remembered them to be, with a few obvious differences. For one, Tom was quite certain that Fred and George Weasley did not own a shop in his world. Were the Weasleys a wealthy family here for a change?

Walking past a witch, Tom approached the Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes with interest. He never liked the Weasley twins, but it would not hurt to-

He stopped abruptly as an image registered in his mind. Looking over his shoulder, he spotted the witch he had just passed by seconds ago. He could only see her back as she walked down the street, but he was almost sure that he had caught glimpse of something very familiar hanging from that toad-like witch's neck.

With barely a second's thought, Tom changed direction, catching up with the witch easily with his long stride.

The toad-like witch narrowed her eyes as she caught sight of Tom. "And who might you be?"

Tom's gaze quickly went to the golden locket glittering on her chest. He was wearing an identical one under his shirt. Slytherin's locket.

"I am sorry, I did not mean to upset you," he said quietly, his eyes still fixed on the locket. "I was merely... captivated by the sight of your locket. It's a magical artifact, is it not?"

Tom wondered if anyone had ever told her that the sickeningly sweet smile on her face made her even more like an overgrown toad.

"It is a family heirloom," she said, "but I don't suppose that concerns you."

Anger sparked within Tom. How dared this woman claim Salazar Slytherin's locket as her own family heirloom? It was an insult to Tom's ancestor, and alternate worlds or not, he could not condone it.

Using Legilimency, he quickly found out who he was dealing with and what she intended to do with the locket. He smirked inwardly at what he found. This was going to be too easy.

"Hem, hem." Dolores Umbridge cleared her throat, obviously annoyed at being ignored.

"Oh, please excuse me," said Tom. "Did you say it is a... family heirloom?"

Umbridge looked pleased. Apparently, she was trying to use Slytherin's locket to pass off as a proof of her pureblood status. It seemed she had no idea that the locket had once belonged to Salazar Slytherin and that it was indeed an invaluable family heirloom. Yes, it was definitely too easy.

"Yes, it is," she said, lifting her head slightly. "What of it?"

Tom acted confused. "I'm not sure I understand," he began slowly. "I have read about this locket before. It is from an old wizarding family,

I believe, with only one descendent remains, but-" He paused, looking reluctant.

"Go on," said Umbridge impatiently. "What is it you want to say?"

"Allow me to be frank, but I have heard that the only living descendent of that family is a-" he lowered his voice for better effect, "half-blood. No offence, but I was always under the impression that the Undersecretary of the Minister is a pure-"

"Of course I am a pureblood," said Umbridge with an even higher voice than before. "Excuse me, but who did you say you are?"

"My name is Thomas. I'm a researcher and collector on rare magical artifacts," said Tom smoothly. "Don't mistake me, this locket is indeed beautifully crafted, but considering your position in the Ministry and, of course, your blood status, I'm afraid it may not suit you too well." Tom did not miss the look of doubt that had entered Umbridge's eyes. Knowing he was succeeding, Tom finished with a disarming smile, "Would you mind if I make a few suggestions?"

A/N: Just to clear things up, the Malfoy in the last chapter is Abraxas Malfoy, Lucius' father, who later died of dragon pox in canon. And the Rosier who Tom talked to is not the same one who attended Hogwarts with Snape, but an older one. He is one of the earliest Death Eaters, according to Dumbledore in HBP.

The next chapter will be about the locket. Tom will realize very soon that something is seriously wrong with it...

Chapter 8: Horcrux

Convincing Umbridge to trade with him had been simple, if not a little time-consuming. Umbridge had taken a liking to him, that much was obvious, especially after he had promised to assist her in finding a suitable substitute as her 'family heirloom'. It might have been much easier to just curse her, grab the locket and modify her memory, but Tom had long learned that the easy way was not always the best, and it took away all the fun.

Considering whose ancestor Dolores Umbridge had unknowingly insulted, Tom wondered if he hadn't actually done the toad-woman a favor. Had it been his darker counterpart who had found her showing off Slytherin's locket in Diagon Alley, Umbridge would definitely have had much more to worry about than her blood status. Or rather, Tom thought wryly, the overgrown toad probably wouldn't need to worry about anything ever again after Voldemort was done with her. Instead, Umbridge had now gotten herself an elegant ruby necklace in exchange for the locket.

Tom's initial intention of taking the locket away from her had been simple – he couldn't allow his ancestor's treasure to fall into another's hands, least of all someone like Dolores Umbridge. But as soon as his hand touched the locket and an agonizing pain shot through him, he realized that dealing with Umbridge might just be the least of his problems.

Being an experienced expert in concealing his pain – something that annoyed Albus to no end – Tom managed to smile as he took the locket from Umbridge's hand.

"Thank you, Miss Umbridge," he said, slipping the locket into his pocket. The pain lessened when the locket left his hand, but only slightly. "It's my pleasure speaking to you today."

Umbridge looked pleased. "The offer I made you earlier still stands, Thomas, if you ever change your mind about working for me in the Ministry."

"I'll consider it," replied Tom politely. He would sooner take over the whole Ministry than work under this woman. "But I'm afraid I have to take my leave now. I'm expected somewhere else and I seemed to have lost track of time in your company."

"Very well, then. I'll wait for your good news, Thomas," said Umbridge. "And I expect you to be discreet about the nature of our... business here today."

"Of course," Tom nodded. "Good day, Miss Umbridge."

As Umbridge made her way towards the nearest flooing point, another wave of pain hit Tom. He gritted his teeth and spun on the spot, apparating back to Hogwarts.

He landed outside the wards of the school, near the edge of the Forbidden Forest. He let out a low groan. The pain caused by the locket was growing steadily stronger, spreading from – he paled at the realization – the curse scar on his chest to the rest of his body.

His scar never hurt, not since the day he received it when he was seventeen. Slowly, he reached up to his scar and froze when his hand came into contact with something wet on his shirt.

Blood.

Something was seriously wrong. Nothing, not even Dark Arts, could reopen a scar left behind by the killing curse.

What was happening? Why was he affected while Umbridge seemed to have been perfectly fine when she wore the locket? Was it Voldemort's scheme? Or was it something else entirely? But it was useless trying to make sense of the situation now. He needed to take the locket back to Hogwarts, where it could be examined properly.

With the ever growing pain threatening to consume him, the walk back to the castle seemed much longer than usual. The sun was setting as he made his way across Hogwarts' grounds. He couldn't help feeling that his trouble was far from over, that the worst was yet to come.

His prediction was proven right just minutes later. He was half-way back to Hogwarts when a voice started to speak in his head.

Why are you heading to Hogwarts? It's too risky for us.

Tom's blood turned cold at the voice that he could recognize anywhere. He stopped in his track, his mind whirring into overdrive as scattered pieces began to fall into place.

"Voldemort, I presume?" he said with a calmness that he did not feel. "Or at least a part of him. A piece of his soul."

When Tom first learned that Voldemort had survived a killing curse, he had already suspected that his counterpart had split his soul. After all, wasn't that what he himself had planned to do years ago? Still, he had never expected to actually come across his counterpart's means to achieve immortality in such a manner. He closed his eyes briefly, half terrified and half disgusted.

Salazar, he was carrying a piece of his own soul in his robe pocket.

He tensed when Voldemort's voice once again spoke in his head.

You spoke as though we are different. And you are scared when you discovered what the locket is, something you should already have known. Who are you?

Despite the commanding tone, Tom could hear the doubt and desperation in the disembodied voice clearly. It was, after all, Tom's own voice.

But he knew better than to continue this mental conversation. While he was the one in control at the moment – and he intended to keep it that way - the fact that the piece of Voldemort's soul could think on its own was worrying.

Tom concentrated and strengthened his Occlumency shield until he completely blocked out Voldemort's now enraged voice. Taking in a deep breath, he continued his walk towards Hogwarts.

There was no questioning of what he had to do now. He found it improper to willingly give away Slytherin's heirloom, but considering what Voldemort had turned the locket into, he knew it was for the best. Albus would definitely be interested in what he had found.

Tom almost felt sorry for Albus as the old man stared at the golden locket in shock.

"You found this in Diagon Alley?"

Tom chuckled lightly at Albus' tone and briefly explained what had transpired in the last few hours. He skipped mentioning the part about the locket causing him pain altogether, as well as the conversation he'd just had with the piece of Voldemort's soul. Albus didn't need to know about them yet.

Albus looked amused when Tom told him how he had gotten the locket from Dolores Umbridge, but the twinkles in his eyes quickly died down as he turned his attention back to the locket lying on his desk.

"Do you know what it is, Tom?" he asked quietly.

Tom knew very well what Albus was asking him, and it had nothing to do with the locket being Slytherin's valuable heirloom.

"I know only too well," he said. It was a long time before he could utter the word that haunted him till this day. "It's a Horcrux."

Albus nodded grimly, peering at him through his half-moon glasses.

Tom sighed. "Now is not the time to discuss my past, Albus."

"Indeed," Albus agreed. He gave Tom one last curious look before bending down to inspect the locket again. "The magic is pouring out from behind the two doors. I think it is safe to say that the soul is hidden inside."

Tom watched warily as Albus straightened up and walked over to a side of the office, where he pulled down the sword of Gryffindor from its frame. Normally, Tom would have said that a simple sword could do nothing against a soul, but he knew Albus had already done it once.

It wasn't hard to make the connection, especially since Tom had just seen the sword a few days ago. The whole incident concerning Marvolo Gaunt's ring made much more sense now. That ring was a Horcrux too.

Albus returned to his desk, holding the sword with his healthy hand. "The locket must be destroyed," he said, staring not at the locket, but at Tom.

The prospect of destroying his counterpart's soul was more than a little unsettling for Tom, even though he knew it was going to happen the moment he brought the locket to Albus.

"I understand," he said finally.

"Would you like to leave this room?" asked Albus. "It may not be a good idea for you to stay."

Tom had to agree, for more reasons than one. The scar in his chest was burning and he was certain that it was still bleeding. He had tried to heal the wound upon entering Hogwarts, but his scar had stubbornly refused to mend.

At this moment, he had little idea of what might happen if he came into direct contact with the piece of Voldemort's soul. Considering what had already happened since he had gotten the locket, Tom would rather not find out the answer through first-hand experience. Unfortunately, there was a problem.

"The locket can only be opened by a parselmouth," he said, "so unless you have a better idea, I think my presence here is required."

Albus looked thoughtful. "It seems we have little choice then."

The locket didn't seem to be carrying any kind of dark curses, but after what had happened to Albus when he tried to destroy Marvolo Gaunt's ring, Tom knew better than to let his guard down. Anything could happen once he opened the locket.

Albus stood opposite from him, across the desk, his expressions unusually solemn. "If you may, Tom? And I don't suppose I need to warn you about not touching it."

Keeping his mental shield to its strongest, Tom looked down at the locket on the desk.

/Open/ he hissed.

The doors of the locket opened at the command and Tom found himself staring into his own eyes. Waves of pain, stronger than ever, erupted from his scar, but at that moment, he was aware of little else other than the pair of eyes staring out from the locket.

Then he could hear his counterpart's voice again. Voldemort was now speaking out loud, in parseltongue, so only Tom could understand.

/I can hear your soul calling out to me and yet you will let him destroy me? Destroy us?/

"I'm not your other half," said Tom quietly. "We are the same, yet different."

The pair of deep blue eyes within the locket turned scarlet and narrowed into slits. Tom recoiled involuntarily.

/Explain yourself!/ demanded Voldemort.

Staring into the pair of inhuman eyes, Tom suddenly felt the need to explain who he was at that final moment before the locket's destruction. "I am from another world," he said. "A world where Tom Marvolo Riddle never became a Dark Lord."

The shock in the other Tom's eyes was clear. /That is not possible./

"It is the truth."

/Then why do you seek to destroy me?/ A cruel gleam entered Voldemort's eyes. /I can see your soul. I know what you desire. We are just the same./

Tom struggled against the force that had taken hold on him, pulling him towards the locket. He couldn't tear his gaze away from the pair of eyes that was boring into his own with sadistic malice.

/I can help you. Together, we can-/

Then the pair of scarlet eyes widened in unmistakable fear. There was a loud noise of metal breaking, followed by a scream, and everything became quiet.

Tom let out a sharp gasp and stumbled backwards, dropping into the nearest chair. The pain in his chest had finally disappeared, leaving behind a vaguely familiar sense of emptiness.

Numbly, he lifted his eyes to find a damaged locket on the desk, pierced by the sword in Albus' hand.

"Tom, are you hurt?" came Albus' voice.

Tom shook his head, his eyes never leaving the pierced locket. In his mind, he could still see the fear in other Tom Riddle's eyes.

"Isn't there any other way?" he heard himself asking.

Albus looked mildly surprised at the question before his expressions turned regretful. "It is beyond any help."

Tom flinched at the cruel words, even though he knew it was most probably true.

"Are you all right, Tom?" asked Albus, coming around the desk to his side.

"I'm fine," Tom lied automatically. What was Albus thinking? He had just witnessed a part of himself being killed! Of course he was not all right. "You can take care of the rest, I assume?" He stood up slowly. His gaze once again fell onto the broken locket. "I don't think there is any magic left in it."

Albus shot him a concerned look. "Why don't you take some rest, Tom? I'll see you tomorrow morning."

Tom gave him a small nod before walking out of the office. His disturbing thoughts haunted him all night.

A/N: In DH, Voldemort doesn't feel a thing when his horcruxes are destroyed. Tom reacts to the horcruxes quite differently, and there's a reason for it.

Chapter 9: Seven the Magical Number

Tom stood beside the window in his room and stared out over Hogwarts' grounds. Hearing what his counterpart in this world had done was bad enough, but actually holding a piece of Voldemort's soul in his hand? Tom let out a deep breath. He could do without that kind of excitement.

Voldemort had split his soul in an attempt to attain immortality. And since the locket had been the second Horcrux that had been destroyed, Voldemort had split his soul not once, but several times.

"Horcruxes," Tom murmured. The word was not even supposed to exist, let alone being spoken in plural form.

For Voldemort to successfully rip apart his own soul multiple times, he must have been completely incapable of feeling any remorse – or anything at all - over his actions. In fact, if Voldemort had really created as many Horcruxes as Tom believed he had, the Dark Lord might not even be considered fully human at this point.

A monster.

With the power that Tom possessed, there were little things in the world that could still scare him. Death was one of them, Horcrux was another, but what he feared the most was the monster that he knew he was fully capable of turning into, even now, even after so many years of forcing himself to change.

He closed his eyes, but all he could see was the pair of scarlet eyes that had widened in fear at the moment of the locket's destruction.

"It is beyond any help."

Those words echoed in Tom's mind. Truth or not, he was having trouble believing that it was Albus who had spoken them. Albus, who in another world had refused to give up on him, no matter how many times he had proven himself to be 'beyond help'.

No matter what Voldemort had done, to both himself and others, it sickened Tom to think that Albus was planning to destroy Voldemort's soul piece by piece. Wasn't there any other way? He wondered again. After all, hadn't Albus spared Grindelwald?

Granted, Albus had allowed his personal feeling to cloud his judgment, but it didn't change the fact that after years of imprisonment, the former Dark Lord had started to show signs of remorse.

Tom shook his head, clearing his mind of the images from the past. He was being distracted. The conflict between Albus and Voldemort wasn't his main concern right now.

For some reason, his old curse scar had started burning the moment he touched the locket. Since no one had ever attempted to travel to another universe before, there was virtually no information on what might happen when the soul of two identical individuals came into contact with each other. Everything that Tom had read suggested that two such individuals, despite the similarities between their appearance and personalities, were essentially two completely separate beings and could therefore co-exist in the same world without any complications. That theory had just been proven incorrect several hours ago; something within Tom had reacted to the presence of Voldemort's soul.

The researcher in Tom rejoiced at the prospect of having a new pet project to work on while the part of him that was still haunted by the past grew wary at what he might find at the end of the trail.

He walked back to the writing desk near the window, where he had been studying his research notes just moments ago. Time to get back to work.

"Come in."

Albus put down the broken locket he had been examining on his desk as the man responsible for its destruction entered his office. What had happened the night before was an unexpected turn of events indeed. He had long been searching for the key to Voldemort's immortality, and his theory had only been confirmed recently. He had never shared his findings with anyone, but Tom had known. Tom had recognized the locket as a Horcrux.

"Lemon drops, Tom?"

"Eating sweets this early in the morning is not good for your health, Albus," said Tom dryly, taking the seat opposite from Albus. He

waved his wand and two cups of tea appeared. He offered one of them to Albus, who was not surprised to find the amount milk and sugar just perfect for him.

A moment of silence passed between them then Tom reached out and grabbed the locket on the desk.

"You've been searching for them, haven't you?" he said, examining the locket closely. "That ring from the other day is a Horcrux too." It was not a question.

"Yes, it is," said Albus, taking note on how Tom had mentioned 'them'. So Tom had known there was more than one.

"How long have you known?"

"How long have I known that Voldemort has created Horcruxes? I have suspected it for some time, but I did not know for sure before the discovery of the ring," said Albus.

"And that's why you said my past is... significant," said Tom. "Because it's your best bet to find out what the Horcruxes are and how to find them."

Albus smiled. "Believe me, Tom, I'm very interested in what you can share with me about yourself and your world, regardless of its relevancy with the war this world is currently facing. But yes, I admit that your arrival has presented me with an alternative – and, as such, a much safer - way to gain certain knowledge that might prove to be crucial for us to win this war."

Tom eyed him seriously. "I have no wish to get involved in this, Albus. Should Voldemort find himself killed, it will not be because of me."

Albus nodded. He had feared as much. Any chance of Tom willingly sharing what he knew of Voldemort's plan was lost now that he knew exactly how Albus was going to use those information.

"I understand your reluctance, Tom," he said. "I will, therefore, ask you only this one question." He leaned forwards slightly. "How many have you planned to make?"

Tom tensed, indicating that he did know the answer, as Albus had guessed. He looked up slowly and met Albus' eyes. Contrary to his seemingly cheerful self, the carefully guarded and calculating look in Tom's eyes now reminded Albus of the orphan he had met over fifty years ago.

"I'm telling you this just because I doubt you'll be able find the answer anywhere," said Tom slowly. "But know that I made that plan many years ago, and plans can always be changed according to circumstances." He closed his eyes briefly before focusing back on Albus. His face was unreadable. "Seven is often considered the most powerful number."

"Seven?" Albus repeated. To rip apart one's soul intentionally was what most would consider pure evil, but to do the act not only once, but seven times?

"Six," corrected Tom, speaking in a calm manner, as though he was lecturing a group of students. "Six Horcruxes together with the piece of soul inside my body, making it seven in total."

For a moment, Albus felt disgusted at what he was hearing, but that feeling soon gave away to curiosity. The question that had been plaguing him since Tom's arrival once again surfaced. What had stopped Tom when he had already fallen so far that he had even considered ripping apart his own soul? What had changed him? All Tom had said about his past was that 'Voldemort' ceased to exist around the time he graduated. But Albus knew that in this world, Tom Riddle had already committed several murders and created at least one Horcrux before he left school. Just how close had Tom been to becoming a Dark Lord?

"Was that plan ever carried out in your world?" he asked carefully.

"I don't have any Horcruxes, if that's what you're asking."

"But you have tried to make one," pressed Albus, his intuition told him that he was right.

Instead of answering, Tom tilted his head, "Do you know what it takes to make a Horcrux, Albus?"

"Murder," Albus replied quietly.

Tom nodded. Slowly, he rolled up his right sleeve and showed Albus his forearm. Albus' eyes widened.

"Azkaban branded their prisoners in the Forties." Tom covered his arm again. "I stayed there for seven years, for the murder of the Riddles. I planned to use my father's death to make my first Horcrux."

"And yet you claimed you do not have a Horcrux."

"I don't," Tom reassured him. "I never managed to make one."

"Why was that?" asked Albus. Had someone stepped in and stopped Tom, as Albus sometimes wished he had had years ago? His gaze fell on Tom's covered arm. Was that the reason Tom had been sent to Azkaban?

"Azkaban couldn't have held me had I not chosen to stay willingly," said Tom, following Albus' gaze. "No, I managed to get away with the murders that night, even though I failed to make a Horcrux." He leaned back in his chair. "It wasn't really anything too complicated. The spells for making a Horcrux are very advanced. They need to be cast in succession with no room for even the slightest errors. I committed the murders, but I couldn't make the rest of the spells work."

That wasn't what Albus had been expecting at all. Tom didn't manage to make a Horcrux the night he killed his father because he failed to cast the spells properly? Albus found that hard to believe, yet Legilimency told him that Tom was telling the truth, or at least part of it.

"The moment the killing curse hit my father, my soul was torn apart. I cast the first spell as soon as that happened to sever the remaining ties between the two halves of my soul. Then I grabbed my old diary and cast the second spell, which was suppose to transfer one piece of my soul out of –" Tom cut himself off with an apologetic look, obviously having noticed the horrified expression Albus knew must have shown on his face. "It was the most crucial step of making a Horcrux. The spell should have worked, but it didn't. And with the kind of dark magic involved in making a Horcrux, a failed attempt

can have very serious consequences to the caster. I nearly died." A haunted look crossed Tom's eyes.

"Did you ever find out why your spells failed to work?" asked Albus, curious. Voldemort had obviously succeeded in the same attempt.

"Not until much later," said Tom dismissively, evading the question. "But had I succeeded that day, my world would probably have ended up similar to this world. Or worse."

"I don't suppose you'll tell me what has caused your change of heart?" said Albus, raising an eyebrow.

"Change of heart?" echoed Tom, amused. "I assure you, Albus, it took much more than a 'change of heart', as you put it, to turn me around."

"What did it take then?" asked Albus quietly. A part of him dreaded the answer, but he needed to know, he needed to know if he could have made a difference.

"Knowing a potential past is as dangerous as knowing a potential future, Albus, if not more so. Nothing can change the fact that my counterpart in this world has successfully made a horcrux – several horcruxes – and became a Dark Lord, so why bother asking?" He searched Albus' eyes, then sighed at whatever he found in them. "But of course, you still want to know."

Albus nodded solemnly. "Tell me, Tom."

Tom eyed him in silence for a long while, then he said, "I was too far gone for anyone to save me at that time. Nothing could sway me from my goal, nothing was enough, except one thing, one simple yet extremely powerful emotion. No, not love, Albus, fear." His eyes glazed over, as though he was remembering the past. "Fear is something that I know well. When I was a student, I controlled the other Slytherins in school by making them fear me. I attempted to create Horcruxes because I feared death. On the day I killed the Riddles, something happened that made me question whether my goal was indeed worth all the efforts, and the risks. I feared what might happen to me if I continued down that path, so much so that I forced myself to change, to become another person. There wasn't a change of heart at all, not at first, at least."

Fear? Indeed, it was one of the few emotions that young Tom Riddle – and now, Voldemort – knew well. Why else would Voldemort insist on hunting down Harry, when the boy was but only sixteen? But could fear alone change a person so profoundly? What had Tom seen that could have scared him so much?

"Believe me, Albus, you don't want to know," said Tom, reading Albus' thoughts easily without the aid of magic. He smirked mirthlessly. "After all, we don't want the only wizard who can rival Voldemort in terms of power to suddenly feel sorry for his enemy, do we?" Before Albus could response, Tom went on, "But I believe we've strayed far enough from the subject of our discussion, which was supposed to have ended long ago, right after I told you the significance of the number seven." He gave Albus a pointed look.

Albus was not at all affected. He knew that what Tom had just disclosed to him was but a small part of his past, but he could wait. He had been playing with an idea for some time now, and it was time to put that idea into action.

"Ah, forgive me, Tom, but you must understand that as a Headmaster, it is my responsibility to ensure both the ability and trustworthiness – and that's especially important at a time like this, I'm sure you agree - of a potential addition to our staff."

Tom froze as the implication of Albus' statement sunk in. It was probably the first time that Albus had managed to catch him – alternate version or not - off guard.

"Albus, you're not proposing-"

"Our last Defense Against the Dark Arts professor, who you've met in Diagon Alley just yesterday-"

"Wait," Tom cut him off sharply. "Are you telling me that Dolores Umbridge used to teach Defense at Hogwarts?"

Albus nodded, amusement shining in his eyes. "Regretfully, she resigned after an unfortunate accident with the Centaurs in the Forbidden Forest near the end of last school term. I've been searching for a suitable candidate for that position ever since. I

believe it's the same subject you used to teach in your world, and in the same school too, incidentally."

"How convenient," Tom murmured, eyeing him warily, even though his curiosity of how Dolores Umbridge came to be Hogwarts' professor was still apparent. "I'm only staying here for at most a year. Surely you'll want someone who can fill the post more permanently?"

"As I said, at the time of war, it's hard to find an experienced teacher who I can entrust the safety of the students with."

"I believe we've just established that I've committed several murders in my life."

"I trust my counterpart's decision," said Albus firmly with a smile. "I'm certain you'll do a good job preparing the students for what awaits them outside Hogwarts. And, as I'm sure you've guessed, Voldemort has taken a great interest in you. It wouldn't take long before he comes after you. Hogwarts is the safest place for you to complete your research at the moment."

Tom looked thoughtful, but no less suspicious. "I'll think about it," he said finally.

Albus nodded, leaning back in his chair in satisfaction. He had no doubt what Tom's decision would be.

Chapter 10: The New Defense Professor

"You're asking me to teach?"

"You graduated from Hogwarts with more NEWTs than any other students. You're well suited for that position."

"Well suited? You must be out of your mind, Dumbledore."

"Now, Tom, I'm merely offering you a job - a rather prestigious job, if I may say so myself."

"You'll trust me with your students? You know full well what I've done, what I've tried to do."

"You're not the only one in this room who has ventured into that path and turned back, Tom." Their eyes met, and for a while neither of them spoke. "And as always, I believe my trust in you is well placed."

That last statement caused an unexpected anger to rise in Tom, mixed with a contrasting feeling of gratitude.

"I know you're still recovering from Azkaban," Dumbledore continued, "but sooner or later you're going to have to find a job. It may as well be Hogwarts that benefit from your knowledge."

"You know I won't refuse that offer. Just don't regret what you've said when you find your students turning against you one day."

"We shall see, Tom," Dumbledore's eyes were twinkling madly, "or I should say, Professor Riddle."

"Do you have everything prepared?"

"Of course. Don't worry, the experiment is going to be a success."

"Can you blame me for worrying? I should have talked you out of it, instead of encouraging you."

"Come off it, Albus, you want to know the result as much as I do. Instead of worrying about me, why don't you keep an eye on my snakes?"

Albus nodded. "I will watch over the Slytherins for you," he shot Tom a stern gaze, "just make sure you get back here in one piece."

Tom grinned. "I've promised my seventh year to be back in time for their graduation, and I never break a promise I made to my students."

Tom waved his wand, putting a final touch to what was to be his classroom for the coming year. Once again he wondered how Albus – a somewhat less trusting one than the Albus who hired him years ago, yet equally manipulative – had managed to convince him to resume his teaching duty in a world that was not his own. He had to admit, though, that there wasn't any place more ideal than Hogwarts for him to complete the rest of his research and gain easy access to news about the war.

Of course, he was well aware of what Albus was trying to do. Tom was the unknown factor in Albus' plan to win the war – and he had no doubt that Albus did have a plan, even though he didn't know what it was... yet. By keeping Tom at Hogwarts, Albus was trying to maintain a degree of control over him, so even though he couldn't be recruited as an ally, Albus could make sure that he wouldn't become an additional enemy.

Still, despite all that scheming in the background, Tom found himself anticipating the students' arrival. After so many years of teaching, he had gotten used to being surrounded by children, and he had – slowly and reluctantly – learned to care for their well-being.

Many years ago, the other Albus Dumbledore had made a gamble in hiring Tom as his Defense professor. The first time that Albus had risked everything to place his trust in Tom, shortly after the murder of the Riddles, Voldemort had been defeated and Tom had ended up in Azkaban for seven years. The second time that happened, Tom had become a professor and had continued to stay in that post for over thirty years.

"Manipulative old coot," murmured Tom, but his lips were curled up in a smile.

Taking a last look around the classroom, Tom pocketed his wand, satisfied that everything was in order. The students should be

arriving soon, but before the opening feast, there were the troubles that came with being the double of a dark lord that needed to be dealt with first.

And troubles they definitely were. After accidentally running into a piece of Voldemort's soul in Diagon Alley, the rest of the summer had passed without further incidents. Tom had split his time in between completing his research, gathering information on the war and the world in general, and reviewing the curriculums left behind by the previous Defense professors - Albus, who looked amused whenever the subject came up, still had yet to tell him the reason behind that supposed jinx on the position. The peace had lasted a little over a month, until a week ago when the rest of the staff returned to Hogwarts to prepare for the new school term.

Minerva McGonagall and Rubeus Hagrid had recognized him at once. Albus - curse the old man - had taken great pleasure in Tom's predicament, but at least he had been wise enough to explain the situation before the staff meeting. So even though both Minerva and Hagrid had had trouble accepting the idea of alternate worlds, there had been no wands drawn or trips to the hospital wings when Albus officially introduced Tom to the staff as Professor Thomas Kray, a researcher of magical theories.

The introductions, however, were not over yet. According to Albus, two students in particular would have no trouble recognizing him – Harry Potter and Ginny Weasley. Tom wasn't surprised about Harry, after hearing what the boy had done, but he had not expected Ginny Weasley to have heard of him. Of course, thought Tom wryly, that was before Albus had so kindly informed him that Ginny had discovered Voldemort's first Horcrux in her first year.

Both Harry and Ginny would be informed of the news before the feast. That meeting should prove to be... entertaining, if anything.

Harry was following the crowd pushing into the Great Hall when Professor McGonagall stopped him.

"Mr. Potter, the Headmaster would like to see you before the feast, please come with me."

Harry exchanged a glance with Ron and Hermione. Why would Dumbledore want to see him?

"We'll see you later, Harry," said Hermione.

Harry followed McGonagall to the Headmaster's office. She said the password ("Acid Pops.") and beckoned him to go upstairs. The door to Dumbledore's office opened as he approached and he was surprised to find Ginny already sitting in one of the chairs in front of Dumbledore's desk.

"Ah, Harry. Sit down," said Dumbledore, smiling. "I hope you've had an enjoyable train ride?"

"Yes, sir," said Harry, taking the seat next to Ginny. Their eyes met for a second, and Harry could tell she had no more idea of what this meeting was about than he was.

"I'm sure you're wondering why I want to meet with the two of you."

Ginny nodded, but Harry was distracted. His scar had started burning all of a sudden, with no apparent reason.

"Harry?" Dumbledore was looking at him in concern.

Harry glanced at Ginny, then back at Dumbledore, debating whether or not he should say anything about his scar. The still fresh memory of the brief moment when Voldemort possessed him in the Department of Mysteries made the decision for him

"It's my scar, sir."

"Is your scar hurting you?" asked Dumbledore.

Harry nodded, noticing that Dumbledore looked intrigued, rather than worried.

"For this occasion, Harry, I believe there is nothing to worry about," said Dumbledore, "though we may have to make certain arrangements when you're in class."

In class? Harry glanced at Dumbledore. The twinkles in the old wizard's eyes seemed brighter than usual. "What do you mean, sir?" he asked.

Dumbledore eyed Harry and Ginny in turn. "Have either of you heard of the term alternate universe?"

Harry shook his head while Ginny answered out loud, "No, sir."

Dumbledore looked as though he was expecting that answer. He started explaining, "Since before the time of the Founders, wizards and witches have begun to discover evidence that suggests the existence of worlds – what we now called alternate universes - other than the one we see before us now. Those worlds are all parallel to this world. That is to say, many other-world versions of yourselves have also just spent a good portion of today on Hogwarts Express, catching up with your friends and sharing candies from the trolley."

Harry was trying to wrap his mind around what Dumbledore was saying. Other worlds? Other versions of himself?

"Those worlds are rumored to be born from the different choices we make," Dumbledore continued. "In one world, I might have chosen to wear a matching pair of socks this morning while in another I didn't. Certain events might happen differently because of that choice, causing a difference between two worlds. But of course, the effects of some choices are more profound and obvious than the others."

Harry tried to imagine a world where his parents were alive, where he was never the Boy-Who-Lived. He pushed those thoughts out of his mind. Why was Dumbledore telling them about this? He voiced his question.

Dumbledore smiled kindly. "For centuries, no one was able to prove the existence of alternate worlds, until two months ago, when a wizard from another world found his way into my office. He has been staying at Hogwarts since his arrival, and he has generously agreed to be our new Defense Against the Dark Arts professor."

Someone from another world? The first thought that crossed Harry's mind was that it was impossible. The second thought was that Dumbledore seemed to have a tendency to find the most questionable individuals to fill that post. Still, it didn't make sense for Dumbledore to specifically tell him and Ginny about it, it almost felt as though Dumbledore was trying to warn them about something.

"Is he someone we know, sir?" he asked.

"I believe you both should have no trouble recognizing him, though you may find him quite different from what you remember," said Dumbledore.

"No..."

Harry turned towards Ginny at her soft whisper. Her face was paler than usual, and she looked scared.

"Ginny? What are you-"

"I was wondering why I was here, instead of Ron and Hermione." Ginny's voice was shaking. "It can only be one person, Harry." Harry had not seen her so afraid since-

Since his second year, when the Chamber of Secrets was opened.

Ginny was right, there was only one person that among all students, only the two of them had met.

"Tom Riddle," he completed Ginny's thoughts, hardly believing the conclusion he had drawn. Surely Dumbledore wouldn't... but Dumbledore's eyes were still twinkling brightly, and he had shown no signs of denial at Harry's wild guess.

"Five points to Gryffindor," came a voice from behind Dumbledore. "That's a clever deduction, Miss Weasley, Mr. Potter."

Harry felt his blood turned coldly as the man who could only be Tom Marvolo Riddle appeared out of thin air. He was leaning against the wall behind the Headmaster's desk, apparently having stayed invisible somehow and heard the entire conversation.

Harry could feel Ginny flinch when Riddle pushed himself off the wall and walked up next to Dumbledore, who looked as calm as ever.

Riddle looked just like an older version of the sixteen-year-old Tom Riddle in the diary. His eyes were deep blue, instead of red, and he had none of Voldemort's snake-like features.

Riddle's warm smile seemed genuine, but Harry knew not to let down his guard. His hand was slowly edging towards his wand when Riddle's words finally sunk in and the whole situation dawned on him. It made perfect sense now why Dumbledore had specifically told him and Ginny who their new Defense professor – Defense professor! As if Riddle could teach! – was before anyone else. His eyes snapped back to the Headmaster.

"Professor Dumbledore?" Many questions were conveyed in that one name.

But it was Riddle who answered. "As Professor Dumbledore has already told you, albeit in his cryptic way, I came from another world." He eyed Harry and Ginny in turn before continuing, "I'm sorry to hear what my other-self has become in this world, and what he has done to you, but I am not him, I am not Voldemort." Harry tensed at the name, his hand tightening around his wand. "I don't expect you to trust me all at once. All I ask is for you to give me a chance to prove that I'm not the man who hurt you before and that I mean this school no harm."

Harry wanted to jump up and said that Riddle was a danger, that Dumbledore had made a serious mistake, but Riddle's words had stopped any protest from coming forth.

"If you're really from another world," said Ginny, her voice shaky, but grew steadier with each word, "then how did you get... here?"

Strangely, Riddle looked pleased at the question. "I could talk for days to answer that one question, Miss Weasley," he said. "To put it simply, I've been trying to find a way to travel to another world for many years. Around two months ago I decided to put my theory to test. It's a dangerous experiment, but it is also the only way to prove that other universes do exist. And as you can see now, the experiment has been a success so far. Now that I'm here, many more in depth studies can be carried out." He smiled. "But I'll spare you the lectures for now."

"An experiment?" Harry once again glanced at the Headmaster. Did Dumbledore really believe Riddle?

"Indeed," Dumbledore spoke up for the first time since Riddle had made his appearance, "and from what I've heard from Tom so far, it is what most would call a reckless attempt."

"What Professor Dumbledore means," Riddle explained, "is that when there're so many unknown factors in an experiment, especially one that involved the combination of several advanced magic, generally the outcome can be quite unpredictable."

Harry wasn't at all concerned with the risk that Riddle had taken. He still found it hard to believe that Riddle's sudden appearance was merely due to an 'experiment'. Why now when the second war against Voldemort had just started? And what had Riddle done to make Dumbledore believe his far-fetched story?

Harry turned towards Riddle and their eyes met. The pain in Harry's scar suddenly intensified and Harry couldn't help letting out a hiss in pain. Trying his best to ignore the pain, he held Riddle's gaze defiantly.

"If you are not Voldemort, then why does my scar hurt when you're here?"

Riddle stared at Harry thoughtfully for several seconds without a word. To Harry's surprise, he felt the pain in his scar slowly subsided, even though he and Riddle had not broken eye contact and Riddle didn't seem to have done anything visible.

"Do you feel better now?" Riddle actually looked concern.

Harry nodded. "What have you done?" he asked cautiously.

"Occlumency," answered Riddle without hesitation, as Dumbledore probably would have. "You should feel even more comfortable if you, too, put up your own shields."

Harry stared at Riddle blankly. His thoughts shifted momentarily to Sirius, then to his disastrous Occlumency lessons with Snape.

"What's Occlumency?" Ginny spoke up.

Riddle turned towards her, then grimaced as though he had just remembered something. "Ah, yes, of course Dolores Umbridge

wouldn't have considered it important to teach her students how to protect their minds," he said, glancing briefly at Dumbledore before focusing back on Harry and Ginny. "Don't worry about it for now, you'll be learning it in my class soon."

Harry blinked in surprise. They would be learning Occlumency in class?

"I am sure you'll both find the curriculum of this year's Defense class quite... refreshing," said Dumbledore, smiling. "But my experience told me that it's not a good idea to discuss academic curriculum on an empty stomach, and I'm afraid we have kept the first years nervous enough about their sorting. There is, however, a small favor that I'd like to ask from the two of you before we join the others in the Great Hall." Harry could already guess what Dumbledore would ask of them. "Tom and I have both agreed that it would be best not to announce where he came from and his identity to the rest of the school. While I'm sure you still have many questions – and you're welcome to come and discuss them with me at any time - I must ask you to keep what you've just learned in this room to yourselves," he paused and nodded slightly at Harry, "with the exception of Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger, of course."

It was only until minutes after Dumbledore had dismissed them, when Harry was already following Ginny down the spiral stairs, that he realized Riddle had completely evaded his question. Riddle had never answered why his presence had caused Harry's scar to burn in pain.

Vowing to keep a close eye on Riddle, Harry walked back to the Great Hall with Ginny. He wondered how Ron and Hermione would take the news.

What Harry did not know was that he wasn't the only one whose scar had burnt during the short meeting in Dumbledore's office, and that he wasn't the only one who was puzzling over the reason.

As soon as he was sure that the two thoroughly shocked teenagers were out of earshot, Tom rounded on Albus.

"Harry's scar hurts when he's near Voldemort? And you never saw it necessary to warn me beforehand? Why?" he demanded.

Albus regarded him calmly, though Tom could tell that his question had put the old wizard on guard.

"I admit, Tom, I did not expect Harry to react to your presence the same way he does to Voldemort's."

Tom didn't like Albus' choice of words. His own scar had stopped burning once Harry left the office. Occlumency had helped, but it hadn't been able to block all the pain. The only other time Tom's scar had reacted in a similar way had been when he'd held Slytherin's locket in his hand, which was also Voldemort's...

No, it couldn't be. Tom stopped his own thought. As insane as Voldemort might have become, he would never have entrusted a piece of his soul to a boy he considered his enemy. There must be another explanation.

"Why does Harry's scar hurt in the first place?"

Albus eyed him closely for a long while before answering, "It is my belief that the backfired killing curse fifteen years ago has created a connection between Harry's mind and Voldemort's."

Tom had studied the killing curse inside and out, and he could say with complete certainty that, backfired or not, the curse would never have behaved as Albus had said. And if there really was some kind of magic that could create a connection between two minds, it must have somehow escaped Tom's notice, because as far as he knew, such magic did not exist.

What could be the explanation then?

Tom met Albus' gaze. "We'll discuss this some other time, Albus," he said, with a tone that suggested he knew the old wizard was hiding something. "I believe the students are waiting for us."

Albus nodded. A slight smile returned to his face. "Are you ready to meet the students, Tom?"

Tom raised an eyebrow. "What you should be asking, Albus, is if your students are ready to meet me," his blue eyes shone with anticipation, "because I'm going to work them hard."

A/N: In HBP, Harry was assaulted by Malfoy and didn't manage to get off Hogwarts Express on his own. But since Dumbledore never offered Slughorn a job in this fic, there's no Slug Club, and the incident on the train with Harry and Malfoy did not happen.

The next chapter will be about Tom's Defense classes, temporarily entitled Unicorn and Spider. As much as I'm looking forward to writing that part, which should be really fun, RL comes first. I'll try to update as soon as I can.

Chapter 11: Unicorns and First Years

It was the third day since the new school year began. Harry found himself subconsciously waiting for something – anything - to happen. Considering who was sitting among the professors at the high table, everything seemed too... normal, too peaceful.

It had taken Hermione two days to locate the first book in the library that contained information on alternate universe. Apparently, it was not a well-studied subject.

"Because of its limitations," Hermione explained. "There was no proof at all that alternate worlds really exist, so the whole subject was based purely on assumptions. Even all the information we have in this book was taken from myths or rumors. If Professor Kray is really who he claims to be, then he has done what no one was able to do for centuries. Can you imagine-"

"I don't know what you're so excited about, Hermione," Ron cut in, keeping his voice low so as to avoid the group of fourth year walking by from overhearing them. The three of them were sitting near the end of the Gryffindor table. Many other students were already leaving the Great Hall after lunch to prepare for their next lesson.

"I mean," Ron went on, "it's You-Know-Who we're talking about." He sneaked a look towards the high table, where Riddle was talking to Dumbledore. "I have to say, though, the bloke look pretty normal to me."

"That's because it's not him, Ron," said Hermione, exasperated. "Have you been listening to me at all this whole time? It's obvious that he's never become a dark lord in his world."

"That is if he's really from another world," Harry reminded her.

"Well, Dumbledore certainly seems to believe him." Ron glanced at the high table again. "They seem rather comfortable in each other's presence, don't you think?"

Yes, Harry had noticed that too. The thought of Dumbledore letting down his guard around Riddle filled him with uneasiness. Dumbledore had been wrong about their Defense professors before, who said he wouldn't again?

After lunch, Hermione left for Potions while Harry and Ron headed back to Gryffindor Tower. Harry only managed an 'E' in Potions, meaning he couldn't get into Snape's advanced Potions class. McGonagall, who apparently had taken her promise to help Harry become an Auror very seriously, had suggested Harry to study Potions privately and applied for the Potions NEWTs as an independent student at the end of his seventh year. Harry, who had never considered it a possibility to take the exams without attending the classes, had agreed immediately. He would probably get a higher mark without Snape criticizing his every move, anyway.

The Gryffindor common room was almost empty. Neville was tending to a plant Harry couldn't identify near the fireplace. He looked up when portrait of the Fat Lady swung close behind Ron and Harry.

"Harry, Ron, have you heard?"

Ron and Harry exchanged a glance. "Heard what?" asked Harry, taking a seat next to Neville. Ron chose to sit on the floor, facing the two of them.

Neville shifted uncomfortably at the attention. "The first year just had their first Defense lesson before lunch."

"And?" Harry prompted, his interest perking up.

His first Defense lesson wouldn't begin until tomorrow, but he had been trying to gather the other students' comments on Riddle's classes. Apparently, every one of Riddle's classes had spent their first lesson doing quizzes on what they had learned so far.

"I don't know what happened," said Neville, "but the first years all looked scared when they came in the Great Hall for lunch. Didn't you see them?"

"We were sitting at the other end of the table," said Ron with shrug. "What do you mean by the first years looking scared? Was he strict to them or something?"

"I don't know," Neville frowned, "but they looked truly terrified."

"Even more so than after Potions?" asked Ron, chuckling. "They looked pretty shaken last night too, not that I blame them."

Neville nodded. "I think Professor Kray's shown them something in class," he paused, looking troubled. "They mentioned a unicorn."

Images of a dark figure drinking the blood of a dead unicorn in the Forbidden Forest flashed before Harry's eyes.

"Do you know what he showed the first years?" asked Harry.

Neville shook his head. "The second years may know better," he said. Then he grimaced. "Make me nervous about the Defense class tomorrow."

Harry was more curious than nervous. What kind of teacher would Riddle be? Probably another Snape, judging from what he'd heard so far, or worse. Bullying first years certainly sounded like something Riddle would do.

Tom studied the group of students sitting before him. First years, Slytherin and Ravenclaw. From their lack of fear, the story of what he had done to his other class of first years – Gryffindor and Hufflepuff – this morning apparently had not spread fast enough to reach the other two houses, which worked perfectly for him.

"Welcome to Defense Against the Dark Arts," he began, addressing the whole class. "By the end of this year, I expect you to be able to properly defend yourself from, at the very least, everything that a third year can throw at you." That should be a fairly easy task, given how low the standard this particular course had been in this school. "We'll be doing a lot of practical work this year and I expect you to follow every one of my instructions closely. If I ever find you causing harm to your classmates because you fail to do so, be prepared to spend most of your free time in detention with me. On the other hand, if I find your progress satisfactory, we'll be doing an in-class dueling competition later this year." Several students brightened up at the prospect. Tom smiled. "But let's not worry about that for today. This first class is for introduction. All that is required of you is to watch, and remember." A few Ravenclaws picked up their quills, but Tom knew they would forget all about taking notes very soon.

"Now, let us begin. Who can tell me the meaning of Dark Arts?"

Several hands shot up at once. Four Ravenclaws. Tom picked a blonde girl sitting at the front row.

"Dark Arts are potentially dangerous magic that can cause permanent or incurable harm to another being. That is why in most cases, using Dark Arts intentionally on another human is considered illegal."

Tom nodded in approval. "Five points to Ravenclaw. This is the way the Ministry of Magic classifies dark spells and curses – by their effects. But while this simplified form of classification has been used for decades, it is misleading and it hardly does the Dark Arts justice. The Dark Arts are so much more than just their destructive power, so much more than just their effects on the victims. What truly is the Dark Arts? Why do we have to fight against them? These are the two questions that you need to ask yourselves while studying this subject. And today, I hope I can give you a start on finding out your own answers." He paused to allow the students time to think over what he had just said. "But before we continue, let me first introduce you to our guest for this class."

Tom waved his hand to cancel the invisibility charm he had placed on his 'guest'. Several students jumped in surprise as a tall creature materialized in the middle of the classroom.

"The unicorn has always been seen as a symbol of purity and innocence. The one before you now is a unicorn child, no more than four years old. As you can see, it doesn't have a horn yet and it is silver instead of pure white."

The unicorn glanced around the classroom curiously as excited whispers broke out in the room. Tom waited until the students turned their attention back to him before continuing.

"Unicorns are peaceful creatures that live in the forest. They are resistant to most magic, but they are vulnerable to the Dark Arts." The students gasped as he pulled out his wand in a swift movement and leveled it towards the unicorn, which, sensing his intention, started to back away. "Slaying a unicorn is a crime, an unforgivable act that most considered evil." His eyes hardened. With an ease that most would find disturbing, he cleared his mind of all emotions and summoned up just the right one. He spoke the incantation softly, but

his voice was significantly colder than it had been moments ago. "Imperio."

The few students who recognized the incantation froze while the others watched in confusion as the unicorn started to pace around the room.

"Intention," said Tom, directing the creature to walk in a large circle, "it is what set the Dark Arts apart from other types of magic. For most spells all you need are the correct incantation and wand-movement. But for the Dark Arts, there is one more requirement - you need to have the suitable intention. The Imperius Curse, what I'm using right now, allows me to have complete control over the unicorn's actions." He slowly directed the unicorn back to its original place at the middle of the classroom. "To use this curse successfully, I need a desire to dictate this creature's every move, to rob it of its free will. Similarly, to torture and to kill, I need to truly wish my victim's pain and death." He released the curse while the students watched in stunned silence. "Intention is what makes the Dark Arts so different, so addictive, and so dangerous." He raised his wand again. "Crucio!"

The effect of the second Unforgivable Curse was immediate. The unicorn's painful whimper shook the students out of their stunned stupor.

"Stop that!" A Ravenclaw girl cried out.

"You can't do that!" A Slytherin quickly followed.

"Stop it now!"

Desperate voices cried out from both the Slytherin and the Ravenclaw side of the room. Tom held the curse a few seconds longer before lifting it, leaving the unicorn child panting helplessly.

He surveyed the class, which was now in complete silence. The students were staring at him with a mixture of fear and anger.

As they should, thought Tom.

"This is what the Dark Arts can do," he said quietly after a few more minutes had passed. "They can torture, they can kill, and they can

destroy all that is good and innocent in this world. Countless wizards and witches have stumbled under the power of the Dark Arts in the past. Some lost their lives while trying to protect those they cared for from dark wizards, others lost their souls because they chose to surrender themselves to the power the Dark Arts offered." Tom let his gaze sweep pass each of his students. "I can teach you skills that may save your life one day, but I cannot protect your soul. You may hate me now, you may think of me as evil, but let this be a lesson to you. When you are faced with an enemy much more powerful than you are, when you are cornered and the Dark Arts seem to be the easiest way out, when you have to choose between what is right and what is easy, remember what you've seen today and remember the resentment you feel towards me right now, then make your choice wisely."

He paused for a moment to let his words sink in, then he lifted his wand again. "Defense Against the Dark Arts is a subject that integrates all other disciplines, be it Charms, Potions," he waved his wand towards the unicorn, "or Transfiguration. Given more training, you'll be able to identify a transfigured object, especially a transfigured magical creature, with ease."

The students watched in shock as the whimpering unicorn slowly shrieked and changed back to its original shape, until finally only a small piece of stone stood in its place. Then-

"So that's all just for show?"

Tom raised an eyebrow at the Slytherin who had commented. "I assure you, the effects of those two curses are very real, even though it's 'just for show'. Would you prefer otherwise?"

The Slytherin averted his gaze. Then, when it become apparently that Tom expected an answer, he murmured, "No, sir."

Tom nodded. "Good. And five points from Slytherin for your tone."

The school bell rang. Quite a few students heaved a sigh of relief.

"Class dismissed. There will be no homework for today." Tom smiled wryly. "We'll be going through the theories in your book next time. So rest assured, our next class will be as boring as you wish it to be."

Minerva frowned as their latest Defense Against the Dark Arts professor entered the Great Hall for dinner. The entire hall fell silence at once.

"Good evening, Professor McGonagall." Tom Riddle took the empty beside her. He didn't look at all bothered by the stares the students were directing at him.

"Professor Kray," Minerva returned the greeting stiffly. She never would have believed it possible for Albus to find someone worse than Dolores Umbridge to fill the Defense post, yet...

What was Albus thinking? She wondered not for the first time.

Whispers broke out in the hall again, though Minerva could still see students sneaking looks towards Riddle occasionally. Dinner had not started yet and only about half of the students were present at the moment. Most staff members, including Albus, had not yet arrived.

"I heard of your lesson with the first years today," she began.

Riddle raised an eyebrow. "You disapprove of my teaching method."

Minerva pursed her lips. "We do not show the first year students the Unforgivable Curses, especially not during their very first week of class," she said, keeping her voice low. It was not appropriate for the students to hear their professors arguing among themselves.

"They're going to find out what the Dark Arts are eventually, whether you like it or not. And believe me, the temptation to use the Dark Arts only grows as they learn more about magic and their own power," said Riddle. "Some students from the higher years may see the Dark Arts as tools to gain power, but the first years are still innocent enough to recognize the Dark Arts as something that they should be wary of."

Wary of the Dark Arts? Tools to gain power? "They are only children," said Minerva.

"They are also wizards and witches born with power that many do not have." Riddle countered. "You've never used an Unforgivable

before, have you, Professor McGonagall? It's as easy as turning a match into a needle, if not more so."

Minerva narrowed her eyes. "What are you trying to say?"

"I'm merely telling you that age never matters when it comes to the Dark Arts," replied Riddle calmly. "Why do you think the Ministry specifically lists the Unforgivables as such? Not only because of what those three curses can do, but also because they are the easiest ones among all Dark Arts. They feed on emotions instead of magical power. Anyone who can use magic, including your precious first years, should have no trouble casting a successful Unforgivable Curse on their first try, as long as they have the... suitable intention."

Minerva had never heard anyone describe the Unforgivable Curses in such a way. But of course, the man she was talking to wasn't just anyone.

She had known Tom Riddle when he was still a student at Hogwarts. Riddle had been made a prefect the same year Minerva was chosen as the Head Girl, so they had worked together on occasions. Though they could hardly be called friends, it had still come as a shock when Minerva joined the Order of the Phoenix and learned who the Dark Lord Voldemort used to be. And now...

Minerva still wasn't sure if she believed Riddle's story about alternate worlds. But even though Albus' choice of Defense Professor left much to be desired, she knew Albus would never put the students in harm's way deliberately. For now, there was little she could do but trust Albus' judgment.

Looking past Riddle to near the end of the table, Minerva thought she saw Severus inclining his head in agreement to what Riddle had just said. She had no idea when Severus had arrived, but the Potions Master had obviously been listening in on their conversation. In fact, Severus actually seemed mildly impressed by Riddle's speech on the Unforgivable Curses.

"Maybe you're unaware, Professor Kray," Minerva didn't quite manage to keep the irritation from her voice, "but some of our students grew up in the muggle world. They have just started to learn about the wizarding world, it's not necessary-"

Riddle cut her off in mid-sentence. "It is my job to teach the students, not cuddle them and definitely not protect them from what they ought to know just so they can feel better." He stopped suddenly and looked up over Minerva's head. "Isn't that right, Albus?"

Minerva turned around to see the Headmaster standing behind her.

"May I ask what you were discussing before I arrived?" he asked, taking his usual seat on Minerva's other side.

"Take a guess," came Riddle's dry answer. "The entire hall is discussing it."

Indeed, most students had arrived at the Great Hall by now, and they were not trying very hard to hide who they were talking about.

"And before you start accusing me, Albus, may I remind you that you've agreed not to interfere with my teaching method?"

Minerva frowned and turned a questioning gaze towards the Headmaster.

"I agreed that I would not interfere as long as you do not harm the students, and I've seen quite a number of crying first years today, Tom." Albus' tone was light, but it was clear he did not approve of what Riddle had done.

"They'll recover," said Riddle dismissively. "And since we're talking about lesson plans, I'd like to borrow a possession of yours for the sixth year class tomorrow, Albus."

Albus raised an eyebrow at the sudden change of topic. "And what would that be?"

Tom Riddle merely smirked as he named what he wanted.

"What would you need that for?" Minerva asked in surprise.

"Nothing about demonstrating the Dark Arts or torturing transfigured animals, I assure you," said Riddle, looking amused. "You'll hear about it from the students by dinner time tomorrow, I'm sure, if not before."

Chapter 12: Mind Game

The sixth years had their first Defence Class on Thursday. Like other NEWTs classes, students from all four houses were having lessons together.

Theodore Nott sat near the back of the classroom, idly watching the other students as they chatted among themselves. Given the standard of their previous Defense professors, he was surprised at the number of students who managed to get into the advanced class. He had expected Potter and his gang to be here, along with several Ravenclaws, but Neville Longbottom? There were also quite a few Hufflepuffs in the room.

Aside from Theo himself, the only other Slytherin sixth years in advanced Defense were Draco Malfoy and Blaise Zabini, making Slytherin the least represented house in this class – a fact that Theo found quite amusing. With the war going on, no one in this school, except maybe Potter, needed lessons in Defense more than the Slytherins. But as always, Theo seemed to be the only one who could see that.

Of course, one could always learn from books, but it wouldn't hurt to have a teacher who knew the subject. And judging from what he had heard from the first years yesterday, Theo had a feeling that Dumbledore might have finally run out of options and actually hired someone who wasn't a complete idiot this year.

The class fell silent when the door opened and their professor strode in. Theo blinked once in surprise.

"Is that the Sorting hat?" a Hufflepuff sitting behind him whispered.

"Yes, and it sure doesn't look happy," came a reply in an equally low voice. "I wonder what it's here for."

Indeed, Kray was carrying the Sorting hat in his hands. The dusty old hat looked annoyed as it was set on the teacher's bench. In fact, Theo had an impression that it was currently glaring at Kray, who, contrary to the hat, looked quite cheerful.

"Good morning, class," he begun. "You have all gained at least an 'E' in your Defense Against the Dark Arts OWLs despite the

professors you've had in the past, so I'm going to assume that you're either very talented, or you're interested enough in this subject to do some self-studying on your own." Several students in the class exchanged glances, none of them were Slytherins. "This is a NEWTs class, meaning that you're done learning how to conjure a proper shield or how to identify one dark creature from another. This year, you'll learn skills that combine the knowledge of everything you've learned so far. I can guarantee that my lessons are going to be much harder and dangerous than what they used to be, so I expect every one of you to be fully prepared, and that includes extra practice and studying on your own."

Kray seemed to be the kind of person that could capture his audience's attention without any visible efforts, Theo noted.

"There's much I'd like you to learn, but unfortunately, it seems your previous professors have neglected to teach you some of the most basic skills in Defense Against the Dark Arts. We cannot proceed without those skills, and I plan to use less than a month's time to remedy that."

Kray picked up the Sorting hat again. "The Headmaster is generous enough to let me borrow the Sorting hat for this class," a hint of smugness slipped into the professor's voice. "The Sorting hat originally belonged to Godric Gryffindor, but it – ah, my apology – he," Kray corrected himself, glancing at the dirty old hat, "was charmed to keep everything he learns from the students' mind a secret, under any circumstances. The Sorting hat wouldn't say a word to the Headmaster, or in fact, the Founders themselves, even if the student in question is planning to become the next Dark Lord."

Theo thought he saw Potter's back stiffened.

"As such," Kray went on, "the Sorting hat is perfect for you to practice Occlumency."

Theo's eyebrows shot up. Occlumency was an obscure branch of magic that most were not aware of. It was not Dark Arts, but it certainly wasn't the kind of magic that a teacher – especially a teacher hired by Dumbledore – would teach in a class.

"I see some of you recognize that name," said Kray. "Who can tell the class what Occlumency is? I'll give you a bonus point if you can name the kind of magic it specifically defends against."

That would be Legilimency, Theo answered mentally, watching as Hermione Granger's hand shot up in the air. He sat up straighter in his seat. It seemed his intuition about the new professor had been correct. Finally, he was going to learn something new in his Defense class.

Harry had known Riddle was planning to teach them Occlumency, so he wasn't too surprised when he heard what they would be learning in their first Defense lesson. He hadn't expected Riddle to use the Sorting hat, of all things, as a means for them to practice though, but he wasn't about to complain. After the way Riddle had terrorized the first years yesterday, Harry had half-expected Riddle to start throwing Legilimens at them without warning.

"Control your thoughts, clear your mind."

Harry tensed at Riddle's voice. Having his eyes closed while being in the same room as Tom Riddle – who had everyone doing some kind of meditation exercise – was putting him on edge, to put it mildly. His scar had started burning the moment Riddle stepped into the room, and he was close to pulling out his wand at any moment now.

Riddle must be using Occlumency though, since his scar didn't hurt as much as it had in Dumbledore's office a few days ago.

Harry shook his head, pushing away his thoughts. He would never learn Occlumency at this rate. Not that he really expected to with Riddle as his instructor.

"If you have trouble clearing your mind, try to find an object to focus your thoughts on," came Riddle's voice again. Harry had to struggle just to keep his eyes close. "It could be anything – a picture, a song, or even a paragraph from *Hogwarts: A History* – as long as it can keep your mind focused."

An object to focus his thoughts on? The image of Draco Malfoy jumped into Harry's mind; he had been trying to prove that Malfoy was a Death Eater since running into the blonde in Diagon Alley. But

he could hardly use that to practice Occlumency, could he?

What else then could help him focus then? It had to be something that had nothing to do with Voldemort or Death Eaters, so that left...

Of course, Quidditch.

Harry tried to picture the Quidditch pitch in his mind. The goal posts. The scoring area. The audience stands with different house colors. He imagined himself flying on his broom, overlooking the pitch.

To his left, something glittered under the sunlight. He immediately chased after it, calling forth the concentration that had always come naturally during Quidditch matches.

He didn't notice that the imaginary Quidditch pitch had faded from his view, along with every other thought in his mind. He eyes focused solely on the golden snitch, flying just inches away from his reach –

"- think you're ready, you may open your eyes, but keep your mind focused."

Harry jumped and blinked a few times as opened his eyes. He realized with a start that he had, for the first time, managed to keep his mind free of all thoughts. The pain in his scar also seemed to have faded a little. Was this what Snape had meant by 'clearing his mind'?

He looked around the classroom. Several students still had their eyes closed, including Ron. The redhead furrowed his brows, either in concentration or in confusion as to what he was supposed to do.

Looking away from Ron, Harry found himself staring straight into the eyes of Tom Riddle, who was standing near the back of the classroom. Startled, his concentration slipped and a sharp pain immediately erupted from his scar.

Frustrated, Harry worked to clear his mind again. He pictured the golden snitch, flying slightly ahead of him. He concentrated only on the image and let all other thoughts faded back to the depth of his mind. It was harder than it had been before, but slowly and surely

the pain in his scar lessened to a more bearable level. To Harry's surprise, he saw Riddle nodding his head in approval.

Riddle broke eye contact seconds later and turned his attention to another student. Harry took the chance to study his new professor.

His identity aside, Riddle's lesson wasn't anything like he had imagined. For one, Riddle seemed to have quite a lot of experience in teaching. And as he watched Riddle bending down to explain something to Neville, Harry had a feeling that Riddle actually liked teaching them, which was highly unsettling, as far as he was concerned.

It took ten more minutes before Riddle was satisfied with their progress. He walked back to the front of the class and addressed them all again.

"Keeping your mind clear of all private thoughts is a conscious effort. If you're doing it right, then your magic should respond to that effort naturally by forming a shield around your mind," explained Riddle. "But Occlumency is a branch of magic, not some kind of calming technique, so our work here is not done yet. So far, you've formed a tentative shield around your mind. That shield can prevent you from projecting your thoughts out unconsciously, but it wouldn't hold when someone try to get in. Our next step is to strengthen it with magic, which is where the Sorting hat comes in." The Sorting hat huffed indignantly, but Riddle ignored it. "When I call your name, you will come up here and put on the hat, like you did during your sorting. If you've done the first step right, then you should be able to feel the hat trying to get into your mind. Remember that feeling and try to force back the invasion with your magic. I'll take questions after you've all tried the first round." Riddle paused briefly then added, "I believe this is the safest setting you can get to learn Occlumency. But if this exercise makes you feel too uncomfortable, you have the choice to hand in an extra essay instead for this class' mark. Anyone's leaving? No? Well then, let us begin."

Harry found it odd that Riddle would let them skip the whole practice, but he didn't have time to ponder on it since he was the first one Riddle was calling up front.

Harry sat down on the chair that Riddle had placed at the front of the class. He closed his eyes and Riddle put the Sorting hat on his head.

The hat was not speaking to him this time, nor was it dropping any weapons on top of his head. Harry waited, trying not to lose his focus. Then suddenly, he felt it.

It began with a light probe, against what must be the 'shield' Riddle had mentioned. Harry wasn't even aware that there was a shield until now.

The probing stopped, but only for a few seconds, then the attack came again, faster and harder than before. Remembering Riddle's instruction, Harry tried to push the invasion back. He could feel the shield protecting him getting thicker and stronger, but still the hat was forcing itself in, until-

Harry winced as the invading presence broke through his shield. And immediately he could hear a familiar voice speaking in his mind.

"That was not bad, not bad at all."

"You still managed to get in easy enough," replied Harry.

"Of course I managed to get in! What do you expect? Only a handful of wizards can hold me off, and never a student. Humph, I told Riddle this is a bad idea."

Harry's head snapped up. "You know who he is."

"Yes, I know who your professor is. Why else do you think he could talk me into this?"

"Because he is an heir of the Founders?"

An unmistakable hint of annoyance from the hat confirmed Harry's guess.

"Off you go now, the other students are waiting."

Harry pulled the hat off his head and handed it back to Riddle. He realized his forehead was covered in sweat, but the pain in his scar had disappeared almost completely. He looked up to see Riddle smiling at him.

"Five points to Gryffindor." At the shock on Harry's face Riddle's chuckled lightly before turning back to the class. "Mr. Longbottom, you're up next."

It was after dinner that night when Severus Snape heard of what Thomas Kray – if that was even his real name, which Severus doubted – had taught the sixth year students. Though no one would ever hear it from him, Severus had to admit that he was impressed.

First showing the first years the Unforgivables and now teaching the sixth years Occlumency. It was no wonder why Kray had caught the attention of both Dumbledore and the Dark Lord. And Severus' too, if he was honest with himself.

He had heard how Kray describe the Unforgivable Curses the night before. And he knew that only a man who had a deep knowledge in the Dark Arts – and not only defense - could talk about them the way Kray had.

Then Kray had taught the students Occlumency today, an art that only a few had knowledge of and was almost impossible to teach, as Severus' lessons with the Potter brat last year had proven. No one would willingly expose their mind to another, even to their teachers. So even though having guidance could significantly speed up the learning process, most Occlumens' were self-trained.

Kray had obviously found a way around that restriction; a very clever way, Severus admitted. But just how could a supposedly new professor, who had just come to Hogwarts this summer, think of using the Sorting hat as a tool for teaching? It was almost as though the man had been teaching at the school for years.

Walking along the quiet corridors of Hogwarts in his night patrol, Severus continued to ponder on what he had learned of the new defense professor. He held his wand high to light up the dark corridors, his eyes scanning every corner for students who were out of bed after curfew.

He had first assumed that Kray was a friend of Dumbledore's, or perhaps someone who had helped fighting the Dark Lord in the first war. But after watching how the two interact during mealtime, Severus was starting to have his doubts. They seemed to know each other very well, yet at the same time they acted as though they

were only a step above strangers. Either one had to be an act, and Severus put his bet on the former.

What kind of game was Dumbledore playing at this time? Severus wondered. It had to be about the war, but how did Thomas Kray fit into the old wizard's scheme? And how did Kray fit into the Dark Lord's scheme, for that matter?

Severus still remembered the meeting just before school started. The Dark Lord had almost looked... shocked when Severus informed him of Dumbledore's latest choice of Defense Against the Dark Arts professor. He had then been asked to recount everything concerning Kray in details, including the man's appearance. The Dark Lord rarely showed such interest – obsession, even – aside from news concerning Potter.

Severus stopped in his track as he caught sight of a flicker of light coming from the end of the corridor. A student was out of bed. Was it Potter? It was typical for the boy to break school rules on the first week of class.

The sole other light source other than the light from Severus' wand was coming closer, towards where Severus was standing. Fool, though Severus as he extinguished the light of his wand and waited in the darkness.

But it was not a student that was lingering in the corridor after curfew, but the subject of Severus' earlier musing.

"Ah, Professor Snape."

Thomas Kray was holding his lightened wand in one hand, balancing a pile of books in another. Severus narrowed his eyes; years of being a spy told him that the surprise on Kray's face was feigned.

"I don't seem to remember you being on patrol duty tonight, Professor Kray."

"No, I'm not. I was merely searching for books in the library," said Kray calmly. "It seems I have lost track of time."

The library was supposed to be closed at this hour, to the students and the staff. So Kray thought he was above rules then?

Severus' gaze fell onto the pile of books in Kray's arm and raised an eyebrow. "I wasn't aware you're interested in curse breaking."

Kray met Severus' eyes. Something about the calculating glint in the pair of deep blue eyes sent a shiver down Severus' spine. He unconsciously tightened his grip on his wand.

"I would think it is a mutual interest, Professor Snape."

Severus narrowed his eyes. "That curse is unbreakable."

"I am known to do the impossible," countered Kray swiftly. How arrogant was this man?

Severus could feel his annoyance rising, but he had to ask. "Have you found out anything?"

"I'm not in the habit of discussing unfinished work with those unrelated to my project," replied Kray. "Unless you'd like to assist? I could use the knowledge of a Potion Master."

Severus was tempted to curse the man, and Kray looked as though he knew exactly that.

"But I think I've delayed you long enough, Professor Snape. If you're interested in this little project of mine, you should be able to find me reading in my office all night." With a curt nod, Kray walked past Severus and disappeared down the corridor.

Severus stared after him with gritted teeth. He had a feeling that this whole encounter had not been an accident at all. To add to his annoyance, he knew Kray's invitation was not one that he could ignore.

Chapter 13: Priorities

"Are you insane?" was Tom's first words after he had seated himself in front of Albus' desk.

Albus merely eyed his visitor with a small smile. "Good morning, Tom. Would you like a cup of tea?"

Tom ignored him completely. "Severus Snape is one of Voldemort's followers."

Albus leaned back in his chair, giving this conversation his full attention now. He had wondered when Tom was going to find out that particular piece of information. It was now only the third week of September; Tom had certainly taken less time than he had expected.

"May I ask how you came to that conclusion?"

"You learn a lot about a person by working with them," said Tom simply.

Albus didn't think Tom had any contact with Severus aside from what little interactions they had during mealtime. For some reason, Tom seemed to hold a deep grudge against Severus, but as always, he was good at masking his animosity.

"Not to mention Voldemort actually marks his followers." A hint of contempt slipped into Tom's voice. "And he only marks the important ones, so that everyone would know exactly who they should target if they want to weaken his force."

Tom had made similar comments on Voldemort's tactics, or lack thereof, before. They never ceased to amuse Albus.

"Are you telling me you've seen a Dark Mark on Severus' arm?" he asked, intrigued. Surely Tom hadn't forced Severus to roll up his sleeve?

"It was the easiest way to confirm my suspicion," said Tom. Then he smirked and answered Albus' unspoken question. "I did it the same way you always do to see what's under an invisibility cloak."

Tom must have charmed his eyes to see through Severus' robes then. Albus could only imagine how Severus would react to this violation of his privacy, but he knew for certain that any accusation of Tom abusing his power would only end up being bounced right back at him.

"I never looked beyond his left arm, in case you plan to tell him."

Albus closed his eyes briefly. "I don't think that would be a good idea, Tom."

Tom's amused look told Albus that he would very much like to see Severus' reaction.

Albus sighed. "I'm aware of Severus' past," he said finally.

The smile dropped from Tom's face. "I know," he said, turning serious again. "And that brings us back to my original question. Are you out of your mind? You let a Death Eater teach in this school when there's a war going on?"

Albus knew he would have to tell Tom the truth, or at least part of it, otherwise it would only cause more complications in the future.

"Severus was, and still is, working for me."

"So he's a spy." Tom didn't look surprised. "For which side, I wonder?"

"Severus has my complete trust," said Albus in a tone that left no room for doubt.

"A spy can never be trusted," countered Tom with the same tone.

Albus was growing tired of questions regarding Severus' trustworthiness. And really, Tom should have known better than to question Albus' trust.

"But haven't my counterpart in your world taken just as great a risk when he gave you the Defense position, Tom?" Albus asked quietly. A flash of anger crossed Tom's eyes, telling Albus that he had touched upon a sensitive subject. "I'm not asking you to trust

Severus - he'll have to earn that trust himself, I'm sure - all I ask is for you to keep what you've learned to yourself."

Tom narrowed his eyes. "I'm not looking to ruin your plans, Albus, but I do wonder if you know what you're doing. You knowingly let a Death Eater – or someone who must act like one, which is worse - into this school and give him power over your students. From what I've seen in this school so far, Headmaster, I can't help but wonder if you have your priorities right."

Albus vaguely remembered Dolores Umbridge saying the same thing to him last year, with a different set of 'priorities' in mind, no doubt.

"I assure you, Tom, I take my responsibility as Hogwarts' Headmaster very seriously, and that includes protecting the students," said Albus. "I have my ways of realizing that end, and obviously, you have yours. But ultimately, we both have the same goal – to create a safer place for the students to grow and learn. I've found that it always brings the best results for those of similar minds to work on a common goal together, even from different directions."

Tom shot him a dark look, catching his hidden meaning at once. "You take an awful lot for granted, Albus Dumbledore," he said, standing up from his chair. "Let me make this clear for the last time, I don't have any obligations to help you."

Albus couldn't help smiling as he watched Tom strode out of his office and slammed the door shut behind him.

"Oh, but you will, won't you, Tom?" he said softly to himself.

His decision to give Tom Riddle the Defense position had turned out much better than he had anticipated. It had started as a necessary precaution. Tom, with his power and intelligence, could greatly disrupt the outcome of this war, should he choose to take a side. Letting Tom roam free was too much of a risk, so Albus had offered him a teaching position as a mean to keep him away from Voldemort.

And once again, Tom had exceeded his expectations. It was not Tom's vast knowledge in magic that had surprised him – he had expected that – but Tom's skills in passing that knowledge onto his students. Tom's experience in teaching in his own world definitely

showed in how he conducted his classes. While the first years were still terrified of their Defense professor, many of the higher year students had quickly recognized Tom as 'a different one from the usual sort', as Albus had overheard one of them saying in the hallway just the day before. It was clear that Tom was quickly earning the students' respect, though his strict demeanor and ever-demanding classes had also gained him a rather notorious reputation.

But what amazed Albus the most was Tom's attitude towards the students. He was cold and distant most of the time, but Albus could tell that at least a small part of Tom genuinely cared about his students. The conversation just now had further confirmed this observation.

Tom had accused him of putting the war before the safety of the students. That accusation alone was a clear proof of how deep Tom had managed to read into this war. It was a serious accusation, and Albus felt no shame in admitting that Tom was right.

Even before Voldemort's resurrection, Albus had already known that one day he would be forced to play two roles at the same time – Hogwarts' Headmaster and the leader of the Order of the Phoenix. He had known that one day he would have to choose between fighting against Voldemort and protecting his students. That choice had been made the moment he realized the significance of Harry's scar.

In order to bring Harry to that last crucial step and to bring an end to the war once and for all, some sacrifices had to be made. Perhaps Albus was partly to blame for drawing the war so close to Hogwarts. Perhaps in favor of planning ahead in the war, he had indeed not done enough to protect his students from what they were too young to face. But in the end, it was all for the best.

So no, Albus did not mind Tom's accusation. In fact, he was more than happy about it. As unexpected as it was, the students had gained an ally in Tom Riddle. And if Tom was willing to help, then there truly wasn't anyone more capable than he was to keep the students safe from Voldemort.

At precisely eleven-thirty that night, Severus Snape once again found himself standing in front of Thomas Kray's office, bringing with

him an ancient Potions text from his personal library. Vowing to make sure that Kray would meet an unfortunate 'accident' like his predecessors had once he had outlived his usefulness, Severus raised his hand to knock. But just before his hand could make contact, the door swung open on its own accord. Severus glared at the door. Somehow, Kray had learned Dumbledore's favorite trick.

Kray looked up from behind his desk. "Professor Snape," he said in greeting. "Come on in, take a seat. And do be careful about that box over by the door; there's a Boggart inside."

Keeping his face blank, Severus walked into the office and took the offered seat in front of Kray's desk. There wasn't much in the office except the desk and a half-filled bookshelf by the wall. Several books on the shelf had no titles. Those were Kray's personal notes on his 'projects'. Severus had only read a handful of them.

Wordlessly, Severus flipped his book open to the last chapter and pushed it across the desk. Kray raised an eyebrow, then he took out the top book from the tidy stack he kept on his desk and mirrored Severus' previous gesture. Severus glanced at the opened book before him. Ancient Runes.

Working with Kray was... interesting, to say the least. Severus knew now that Dumbledore had at least been truthful when he introduced the man as a 'researcher'. Kray was knowledgeable, exceptionally knowledgeable. And as much as it annoyed Severus to admit it, Kray's knowledge in magic far exceeded his own. His understanding in different fields of magic could probably even rival Dumbledore and the Dark Lord. And yet, no one seemed to have ever heard of him until two months ago.

But that could not be true. Severus was almost certain that Hagrid had known Kray before his sudden appearance at Hogwarts; the half-giant was always ill at ease when Kray was nearby. Then there was also Dumbledore, who seemed to have some kind of personal history with Kray.

Since their little collaborative project had begun, Severus had come to realize that at least half of what he learned about Thomas Kray did not add up. The man was an enigma, and Severus hated enigmas.

"This could be useful," Kray commented, looking up from Severus' book. "You may want to look deeper into it."

Severus sneered at Kray's arrogant tone. Oh, how he longed to just pull out his wand and-

But he would endure the man for now, if only for the sake of breaking the curse trapped inside Dumbledore.

Quickly finished scanning the section of Ancient Runes text, Severus looked up to find Kray eyeing him expectantly. Even after two weeks, Severus still remained constantly suspicious of Kray's intention in asking for his assistance. Kray had claimed that Potions was not his strong subject, but Severus knew better than to simply believe his words.

"If we combine this with a Blood Ward," he began slowly.

"Then it's possible to stop the curse from renewing its hold on Albus," finished Kray.

"And the side effects?" asked Severus, already knowing that there had to be at least two or three major ones.

The Dark Lord's curse was among the most complicated ones that Severus had ever encountered. While they were making progress in breaking the curse, they also ran into obstacles all the time. More than once, Severus felt as though they were running like fools in an endless maze designed by the Dark Lord.

"No, the curse can definitely be broken," said Kray impatiently. They had just finished a lengthy discussion based on their findings and Severus had once again questioned whether a cure actually existed. "Voldemort would never use a curse he didn't know how to break."

Severus had gotten used to hearing Kray utter the Dark Lord's name not only without fear, but as though it was some kind of private joke.

"And you know what the Dark Lord thinks because..."

"Because I know how he works. Using an unbreakable curse means he himself would not have any control over it, and that is not acceptable for him."

Severus raised an eyebrow. "Is that your guess, or are you merely talking about yourself?"

"The latter, of course." Kray smirked.

Severus narrowed his eyes. "If you insist on wasting time..."

"Why, Severus, it was you who brought up these questions. Again, I might add."

Annoyance rose within Severus. Kray had no idea what this 'project' meant to him. If they failed, Dumbledore would be killed, not by the curse, but by Severus' hands. If they succeeded, Dumbledore would live and Severus would have to die in his place.

"Unlike you, I do have better things to do than wasting my time on petty research projects, Thomas," he snarled, letting his anger fuelled his words. "If that's even your real name."

"And what make you think it's not?" Kray's voice seemed colder than before.

"Please, you hardly even reacted to that infernal name of yours in the first week."

A dangerous gleam entered Kray's eyes and Severus knew at once that he had crossed the line.

"I would watch my tongue if I were you, Severus Snape," said Kray quietly. Then the anger in his eyes slowly melted away into dark amusement. "And a word of advice, I don't think the Dark Lord would appreciate it if words reach his ears that you've been asking too much questions about me, especially about my birth name. Hearing that particular question always brings out the worst of him. "

Severus couldn't help feeling relieved when Kray turned his attention away from him and back to the books they had abandoned on the desk, apparently ready to get back to work. Severus slowly released his grip on his wand and pushed the whole conversation to the back of his mind. He could ponder the meaning of Kray's words later when he was back in his own room.

The last few minutes had reminded of why he had been so wary of Kray in the first place. Aside from the fact that both Dumbledore and the Dark Lord were interested in him, there was a dark aura about him that set him apart from the other fools Dumbledore had called Defense Professors. And unlike some of his predecessors, Thomas Kray never bothered to hide the fact that he was dangerous.

The students were particularly excited on the second weekend of October. Despite the war raging outside the school, Albus had decided not to cancel Hogsmeade weekends. Tom had protested by saying that a few hours of freedom was not worth risking the students' lives. Albus, however, insisted that it was important to maintain a normal school life for the students, especially when the war was already threatening to alter everything else in their lives.

Having gotten his way, Albus had left the school early that morning, presumably having some 'personal matters' to take care of, which Tom interpreted as matters concerning Voldemort's soul. He tried not to let that thought bother him too much.

Tom himself had chosen to remain at Hogwarts when the students roamed the streets of Hogsmeade. Even in his own world, there was little that could make him venture into the magical village when it was half crowded with over-excited students.

He had spent most of the afternoon marking the third years' essays. It was a frustrating task, especially since this group of third years had not been taught by him before and therefore didn't quite manage to grasp what he expected to see in an essay. After spending hours trying to decipher his students' meaning in between messy paragraphs, Tom finally decided to give himself a break.

His break was cut short, however, when a loud voice reached his ears the moment he stepped out of his office.

"-pelliamus!" There was a brief pause, then- "Petrificus Totalus!"

Alerted, Tom quickly strode down the corridor towards where the voice had come from. He didn't have to venture far. Just round the corner he could see a student – Mark Williamson, a first year Gryffindor - being held in full body bind on the floor. A short distance away from Williamson stood Brutus Gibbon. Tom recognized him as

the first year Slytherin who had challenged him at the end of the first lesson.

Gibbon's head snapped up when Tom made his presence known. He masked his nervousness well, but his stiff posture gave him away. And the boy had every reason to be nervous. Tom's gaze travelled from the unmoving form of Williamson to the two wands Gibbon was holding in his hands. The situation did not look good on the boy at all.

Gibbon opened his mouth to say something, but Tom cut him off. "Release him first then I will listen to what you both have to say." The boy visibly winced, apparently having no idea how to reverse the curse. Tom shot him a disapproving look then pulled out his own wand. "Watch the wand movement. Finite Incantatem."

Williamson stirred and slowly pushed himself back to his feet. He glared at Gibbon, who returned the look with equal hostility.

"Now, let's hear your story," said Tom. "We'll start with-"

"He's the one who attacked me first!" Gibbon blurted out, interrupting Tom. "I was just defending myself, Professor Kray."

"Liar! You're the one who attacked me!"

Tom held up a hand and the two boys wisely shut their mouths. It was clear that one of the two boys was lying and the situation was not in Gibbon's favor. Except, of course, for the fact that Gibbon was wearing a green and silver tie.

Tom Riddle always protected his snakes, and he was willing to extend the gesture to the snakes that weren't his.

He turned his attention to Gibbon, tuning down his Legilimency to a minimal level so that he would only be able to tell if the boy was telling the truth and nothing else.

"You claimed he attacked you, what spell did he use?"

Gibbon blinked. "What-" he gulped at the look Tom was giving him. "The disarming spell, sir."

"Was that before or after you cursed him?"

"Before," the answer came quickly this time.

Tom felt relieved when his magic told him that the boy was not lying.

"What happened after he tried to curse you? No, you'll get your turn, Mr. Williamson." He glanced at Williamson warningly when the boy looked about to protest.

Gibbon stared down at the wands in his hands. "Well, he missed, so I - "

"Look me in the eyes when you're speaking, Mr. Gibbon," ordered Tom. "If you're not the one at fault, then there's nothing to be afraid of, not from me."

Gibbon stiffened, surprise written on his face. Then he nodded with a small smile and met Tom's eyes with obviously more confidence than before. From the corner of his eyes, Tom could see Williamson squirming uncomfortably.

"I was just returning to the dorm, " began Gibbon, "but then I heard someone calling my name. The next thing I knew he," he motioned to Williamson, "was coming up at me from behind and pointing his wand at me. He tried to curse me, but he missed. Naturally I got to defend myself, so I disarmed him and put him in a body bind."

Tom nodded, detecting no lies from the Slytherin. "I think we've heard enough from you for now." He turned towards the other boy, who was staring down at his shoes. "Now, Mr. Williamson. As I recall, you called Mr. Gibbon here a liar."

Williamson nodded, refusing to look at any of them.

"If you've been following our conversation, you should have heard me telling Mr. Gibbon that you have nothing to fear from me," Tom paused, "assuming you're not the one at fault." When he received no response from the boy, he went on quietly, "Now, let's hear your side of the story."

Williamson remained silent and Tom suppressed a frustrated sigh. But a moment later, the boy seemed to have finally found his Gryffindor courage.

"He was right." Williamson squared his shoulder as he spoke, but his gaze remained on the ground. "I attacked him first."

"Why?" the question came from Gibbon, who looked both angry and indignant.

Tom was curious himself. Williamson was a quiet student. He didn't seem to be the type that would go about the school picking fights. Then again, there was a time when no one would ever have believed that Tom Riddle was capable of killing.

Williamson's answer was short, but enough to tell Tom all he needed to know.

"Because your father almost killed my Dad," said the Gryffindor with clenched fists. "He's in St. Mungo's right now. He mentioned the name Gibbon when I visited him this morning."

Gibbon narrowed his eyes. "What are you talking about? Why would my father even know someone from a family like yours?"

Williamson gave the other boy a look of pure loathing. "My Dad's an Auror. He's hurt because people like you and your family-

"That's enough," Tom's cold voice caused both boys to fall instantly into silence. "Tell me," he addressed Williamson, "did your father tell you to take revenge for him?"

Williamson bit his lip. "No, sir."

"Did he even mention the name Brutus Gibbon at all when you visited him?"

Williamson glanced briefly at Gibbon. "No, sir," he said quietly.

"Then," said Tom, "I think fifty points from Gryffindor should be a fair enough punishment. In addition, you will serve one week of detentions with me for attacking a fellow student with no reason

other than trying to make yourself feeling better and one more week for attempting to put the blame on him."

Williamson winced. "Professor-"

"Don't even try," Tom cut him off coldly. "I expect to see you in my office at one o'clock sharp tomorrow afternoon, understand?"

Williamson's shoulders slumped. "Yes, sir."

Tom turned towards Gibbon. The Slytherin looked smug, but Tom had mentored enough snakes to tell that the boy was shaken by what Williamson had said and done. He might have to keep a closer eye on the boy for the next few weeks. But for now-

"As for you, Mr. Gibbon, I will give Slytherin ten points for a successful self-defense practice if you can turn in an essay by Wednesday next week, explaining to me why you shouldn't use a curse before you know how to reverse its effects."

Gibbon flushed then nodded his head.

Tom tilted his head, smirking as another idea hit him. "On second thought," he said, "hand it to Professor Snape, tell him I'm the one who assigned it to you. Don't worry, you'll still get the points once you've handed it in."

Gibbon looked puzzled, but in the end he merely shrugged and nodded again.

Tom was about to dismiss the boys when he heard a voice calling his name.

"Professor Kray."

It was McGonagall, looking paler than usual. She glanced questioningly at the two first years before turning to Tom.

"You're needed in the Hospital Wing," she said in an urgent whisper so that the students wouldn't be able to hear. "There's an incident in Hogsmeade. A student was cursed and Madam Rosmerta was found dead in her own bathroom."

Chapter 14: Death and Fear

The Creevey brothers were the ones who had discovered Madam Rosmerta's body in the Three Broomsticks' bathroom. Aside from the dead body, they had also found an opal necklace and pieces of burnt wrapping paper scattered on the bathroom floor. Curious as always, Dennis – the younger of the two brothers – had reached out for the necklace. At once, the third-year had been levitated to the ceiling of the bathroom. Colin Creevey could only watch in horror as his little brother started to scream in pain.

Dennis had been rushed back to Hogwarts by a group of students. Poppy had quickly summoned Severus who, in turn, had sent for Thomas Kray as soon as he laid eyes on Dennis.

The fact that Severus had asked for Riddle – or Kray, as he was known around the school – would have shocked Minerva, had she not been so worried for her student. But now, as she watched the two working together to save Dennis from the curse, she couldn't help marveling at how well they were cooperating with each other. Few words were exchanged, but both seemed to know exactly what they should do. Severus had gone back to the dungeons with the necklace and returned a while later with a goblet of steaming potion. Riddle had taken up the wand-work. He kept his wand pressed against Dennis' forehead, chanting under his breath.

Knowing that there was little she could do when it came to the Dark Arts, Minerva walked over to the boy sitting near the corner of the hospital wing. Colin had refused to leave his brother despite Poppy's orders. In the end, the school nurse had relented and allowed him to stay, provided that he promised to keep quiet.

Colin was watching Severus and Riddle with a hopeful expression. He looked up when Minerva approached him.

"Is he going to be all right, Professor McGonagall?"

Colin's usually bright eyes were clouded with emotions. It was no wonder since the poor boy had just witnessed his brother being cursed, right after they had found Madam Rosmerta's body.

Minerva silently put a hand on the boy's shoulder, unable to give him the answer he wanted. She herself was still in shock over what had

happened. What should have been a day for the students to enjoy themselves and forget about the war had turned out to be a disaster. Not even Hogsmeade was safe anymore. How long would it take for the war to reach Hogwarts?

Colin's head jerked up suddenly, shaking Minerva out of her thoughts. She followed the boy's gaze to find that Severus and Riddle had finished treating Dennis and were now conversing with Poppy in low voices. Within a second, Colin had jumped out of his seat and ran over to the group.

Severus was glaring at Colin when Minerva joined them at Dennis' bedside.

"Your idiotic brother will live," he said. "The curse was broken just in time to save his life. He would have died had it been more complex in design."

Minerva closed her eyes briefly as relief washed over her.

"When is he going to wake up, sir?" asked Colin.

"Tomorrow afternoon at the earliest." It was Poppy who answered. "The curse is now harmless, but it's still going to take at least two months for him to fully recover."

"But he'll be fine, right?"

"Yes, he will be fine, Creevey," Severus cut in impatiently. "Now get out of here, or do you need a shoulder to cry on?"

"You'll be able to visit him tomorrow, Mr. Creevey," said Poppy, shooting Severus a warning look.

Colin hesitated then reluctantly nodded.

"Thanks for saving him, Professors," he said, looking up at Severus and Riddle with a smile before running out of the hospital wing.

"He should be thankful that his brother lives." Riddle spoke up for the first time after Colin had left. "Regardless of what you think, Professor Snape, that curse was a complicated one. It's your skills that have improved."

Severus' face went blank and Riddle smirked.

"Why, can't take a compliment, Severus?"

Severus glared at Riddle, who looked completely unfazed by it. Minerva exchanged an amused glance with Poppy. She was now even more curious to know what had happened between the two.

"Has anyone contacted Albus?" asked Riddle, turning away from Severus.

"He's in the Three Broomsticks right now," said Minerva.

Poppy shook her head. "I still can't believe it. Why would anyone target poor Rosmerta?"

"She's not the target."

Poppy eyed Riddle questioningly. "What do you mean?"

"Rosmerta worked in Hogsmeade," said Riddle, "she came into contact with all kinds of customers every day. There's no reason to kill her with a trap when she's already such a vulnerable target." The detached way that Riddle spoke of Rosmerta's death was disturbing. "Besides, if she's indeed the target, why would her attacker wait for today, when Hogsmeade was full of student?"

Minerva frowned. "Are you suggesting that the attacker's real target was a student? That Rosmerta's death was an accident?"

"What I'm suggesting," said Riddle calmly, "is that Rosmerta was the attacker, not the victim."

"Professor Kray!" Poppy exclaimed in disbelief once Riddle's words sunk in. "How could you even suggest that-"

Surprisingly, it was Severus who came to Riddle's defense. "Don't you find it odd at all for Rosmerta's body to turn up in the men's bathroom? Don't tell me she went in there to escape from her attacker. She died from the curse in the necklace, not from a direct duel."

"The most logical explanation, therefore," Riddle went on, "is that Rosmerta went into the men's bathroom with the intention to pass the cursed necklace to a student. Didn't Creevey say that there were pieces of burnt wrapping paper on the bathroom floor? My guess is that Rosmerta's intended target attacked her before she could pass him - and it has to be a him – the necklace."

"That's all just your guess," protested Poppy. "I've known Rosmerta long enough to tell you that she would never work for-"

"Professors?" a new voice interrupted their debate.

Minerva followed the voice to find Katie Bell standing at the doorway.

Poppy walked over to her quickly. "Miss Bell?"

Katie looked pale and her eyes were red. It was clear that she had been crying.

"What happened, Miss Bell?" asked Minerva, alerted.

Katie hesitated before answering, "I think Madam Rosmerta had been put under the Imperius Curse."

Minerva's heart skipped a beat. The Imperius Curse?

"Are you certain?" pressed Severus.

Katie nodded, glancing briefly at Riddle. "Professor Kray gave us an essay on the Unforgivable Curses last week. I recognized all the signs when Madam Rosmerta first looked at me in the Three Broomsticks."

"Did you tell anyone?" asked Riddle.

Katie shook her head. "At first I thought I was only imagining it, so I-I'd only told my friend to be careful."

"It wasn't your fault, Katie," said Minerva gently.

"But it is!" Katie closed her eyes and took in a shaky breath. "I could have stopped it."

"Or you could have made it worse," said Riddle. "Don't burden yourself with what could have been, Miss Bell."

And of course Riddle would know all about what could have been, thought Minerva tiredly as Poppy led Katie to the other side of the hospital wing. First Dennis and Colin, now Katie. The students were being dragged into the war and there was nothing Minerva could do to stop that from happening.

"She'll be fine," said Riddle as they watched Katie accept a vial of calming draught from Poppy. "It's merely her... nobility that's bothering her at the moment."

There seemed to be an unspoken 'Gryffindor' before the word nobility.

Riddle turned away from the scene and back to Minerva. "I'm more concerned with the other student involved."

"The other student?"

"The real target of this attack," said Severus, seemingly able to follow Riddle's thoughts perfectly. "If Rosmerta was being put under Imperius, then she's clearly not the target. And since the incident occurred on a Hogsmeade weekend, it's safe to assume that the real target was a student."

"Judging from how the events turned out, it's highly possible that in a simple act of self-defense, that student ended up killing his attacker," finished Riddle.

He smirked humorlessly. "Let's hope it is not another lion, shall we, Professor McGonagall?"

Severus was not surprised when he was called to the Headmaster's office that night. He, of course, knew more about the attack than what he had shared during that entertaining discussion in the hospital wing. Kray had managed to guess part of the truth, but he still lacked several pieces of crucial information – information that Severus was privy to.

"Draco Malfoy's the one behind the attack. His real target, as we both know, is you."

Dumbledore nodded. He took out a Galleon from his drawer and passed it to Severus over his desk. "This was found with Madam Rosmerta. I believe young Mr. Malfoy used it to send messages to her."

Severus inspected the coin. The numerals around the edge had been replaced by words. "She was to pass the necklace to any student who entered the bathroom alone and put that student under the Imperius." The message ended, but it wasn't hard to put the rest of the puzzle together. "The student would then return to Hogwarts and somehow pass that necklace to you, resulting in your demise." Severus snarled. "That fool. Did it ever occur to him that whoever the target was might fight back? Rosmerta was completely defenseless under the Imperius. A plan like that would only work on idiots like Creevey."

"Please, kindly refrain from insulting the students in front of me, Severus," said Dumbledore. He sighed when Severus ignored him. "Draco is becoming desperate. You should keep a closer eye on him."

"He thinks I'm looking to steal his glory. He wouldn't share his plans with me." A bitter note slipped into Severus' voice as he continued, "And in case you haven't heard, Kray has been teaching the students Occlumency for weeks."

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows. "Mr. Malfoy must have improved a lot if he's able to block you from his mind."

Severus glared at him in annoyance. "Don't be ridiculous. I can read his thoughts whenever I want, but my presence in his mind would not go unnoticed."

"Ah, that would not do, of course," said Dumbledore. "But I'm sure even without magic, you'd be able to keep the boy from doing anything that would harm himself or the other students."

Severus grunted in response. "We still haven't found out which student Rosmerta had caught alone in the bathroom."

The twinkles in Dumbledore's eyes dimmed. "That is not a good sign," he said. "I fear, Severus, that a student in Hogwarts is now blaming himself for what happened to Madam Rosmerta."

"A student thinks he killed Rosmerta, you mean."

Dumbledore nodded grimly.

"And he would be right, wouldn't he? Because that is what happened."

Dumbledore frowned. "Severus- "

"It was an act of self-defense, but Rosmerta did die because of that student," said Severus. "And let's not forget that it's Draco Malfoy who gave Rosmerta the necklace in the first place."

Severus felt a hint of satisfaction at the defeated look on Dumbledore's face.

"I don't know why you even bother trying to keep their souls intact," he said. "It's hard enough to keep those brats alive while trying to win this war."

"It is a sacrifice I do not wish to make," said Dumbledore firmly. "Not until I have no other choice." He sighed, then turned the conversation to a topic that they were both more familiar with. "You were summoned last night. What did Voldemort want this time?"

"Same as last time. He wants Kray captured," said Severus. "He still needs a spy at Hogwarts, so he wouldn't risk my cover."

"For now, yes."

Severus narrowed his eyes. "You still haven't told me why the Dark Lord is so interested in him."

Dumbledore leaned back in his chair, eyeing Severus through his half-moon spectacles. "Surely you've noticed Tom's power, Severus?"

Severus had. Though not necessarily at the same level as Dumbledore or the Dark Lord, Kray was undoubtedly powerful, his vast knowledge in magic only making him more dangerous.

"The Dark Lord wants him captured because of his power?" he asked.

"That is what I believe, yes."

Severus doubted it was that simple. "Which side is he on?"

Instead of answering immediately, Dumbledore looked thoughtful. "He is unwilling to get involved with the war," he answered finally.

Severus snorted. "Didn't he realize that he is already involved?" he said. "The Dark Lord has made him his target."

Dumbledore shook his head. "Believe me, Severus, if Tom does decide to get involved, we will know. For now, we should focus on keeping him away from Voldemort."

Severus raised an eyebrow. "Keeping him away?"

Dumbledore smiled. "Haven't you noticed, Severus? Our Professor Kray can become quite obsessive when it comes to satisfying his curiosity - and I have no doubt that Tom is curious about Voldemort. It's only a matter of time before he decides he has gathered enough information and do what I fear he has been urging to do for some time."

All of the remaining Hogsmeade visits had been cancelled following the incident at the Three Broomsticks. It had been three days ago and though school life had remained mostly unaffected, many students still seemed shaken by what had happened.

The timing was most unfortunate for Tom's third year students, because as much as he hated this particular lesson, he wasn't about to change his teaching schedule just to suit them.

"You all know what you're going to fight today," he said, eyeing the third year Gryffindors and Ravenclaws. They were standing in an empty classroom. All the desks had been removed. "Mr. Peakes! What would you do when you encounter a Boggart?"

The boy jumped at being called, but he managed to answer nonetheless. "Er... think of a way to transform what I fear into something funny, then use the... er... Riddikulus spell on it."

"I see some of you still remember what you've learned last week. Five points to Gryffindor." Tom motioned to the wooden cabinet at the corner of the room. "Fighting a Boggart isn't hard in itself; all it takes are some imagination and a correct spell. The key, however, is whether you can overcome your fear and cast the spell correctly." He paused, taking in the nervous look on some of his students' face. "Facing one's worst fear can be a valuable learning experience, especially for the first time, but you don't necessarily have to do it in front of the whole class. If you find yourself preferring a more private setting, I'd allow you to skip this class exercise."

Most of the students looked surprised, a few looked relieved. For Tom, this was a most natural arrangement, born from his own experience as a student. For a Slytherin, revealing one's worst fear in front of a whole class was unthinkable. Even now, he still couldn't understand how the lions could stand revealing such sensitive and useful information as though it was nothing.

"Now, for those who don't want to fight the Boggart, stay at the back of the room. I expect you to come practice on your own after this class. The rest of you, form a line and ready your wand."

Two Ravenclaws left the group and walked towards the back of the room. A Gryffindor girl looked about to join them, but she relented under the other lions' persuasion and remained in the line.

Tom gave the students several minutes to picture their worst fear and think of a way to transform them, then he promptly waved his wand and released the Boggart.

Many hilarious scenes followed, as well as several embarrassing moments for the students. All students managed to fight back the Boggart successfully, until they reached the Gryffindor girl who had wanted to back out before.

"Miss Mason, you turn."

The girl stepped forward and the Boggart transformed. Several students gasped as the temperature of the room dropped drastically. Mason froze, staring at the advancing Dementor in terror. She began to tremble and her wand dropped soundlessly onto the floor.

Tom strode forward, placing himself in between his student and the Dementor. He raised his wand just as the Boggart transformed again.

"Riddikulus!"

Tom's spell hit the Boggart the moment it finished transforming, knocking it several feet backwards.

"Mr. Ackerley, you're up next."

Ackerley, a tall Ravenclaw boy, shook himself out of his stupor and ran forward. The Boggart turned into a giant spider.

"Riddikulus!" Ackerley yelled.

The rest of the lesson proceeded without further incident. By the end of the class, all students except the two Ravenclaws had taken a turn. Several students looked paler than usual, but they all seemed to be in good spirit.

Tom called Mason back by the end of the class. He conjured a piece of chocolate and handed it to her.

"Where have you seen a Dementor before?" he asked.

"There's an attack in my neighborhood this summer," said Mason. She paused, then added, "I'm a muggleborn."

Tom frowned. So the Dementors were running loose in muggle neighborhoods now?

"Er... sir?"

The curious look on the girl's face told Tom what she wanted to know.

"You want to know what my Boggart is."

The girl looked uncomfortable. "It looks like a baby, but I've- I've never seen anything like it before."

In his first few years as professor, Tom had punished all students who dared ask him that question severely. But that had been years ago.

"Some magic is so dark and twisted that they should never be tampered with," he said. "What you just saw was the fate of someone who crossed the line."

Chapter 15: Draco's Detour

"In the past few weeks you have learned Occlumency and the basics of non-verbal spells. Today we're moving on to a topic more appropriate for a NEWT class. I hope you are not already struggling to catch up, because the lessons are only going to get harder."

Tom stood before his sixth year students, his eyes seeking those with green and silver tie out of habit. The three Slytherins were sitting at the back of the room. Blaise looked suitably interested, Theodore was feigning indifference as always, and Draco-

Draco looked as though he had not slept well for days. Something was clearly bothering the boy.

Pushing his observation aside for later thoughts, Tom addressed the students again.

"As I've already told you at the beginning of this school year, I'm not going to waste time introducing new spells to you because you should be able to learn them on your own. Instead of teaching you how to use your spells, I'm going to teach you how to manipulate them."

He pulled out his wand. Predictably, Harry Potter stiffened, his eyes narrowing in suspicion. Tom sighed inwardly. One would think that after one month the boy would start to accept that Tom was not his nemesis.

"Look closely at what you can do with a simple spell." He raised his wand and pointed it towards the back of the classroom. "Stupefy!"

A jet of red light shot out from Tom's wand, but instead of flying straight like a normal spell, it flew around the room in a perfect circle just above the students' head. After the spell had finished its seventh run around the classroom, it suddenly changed direction and shot back towards Tom. Tom waited calmly until the spell was close to hitting him before waving his wand in a sharp upward arc. The spell followed his wand movement and shot upwards, hitting the ceiling with a resounding explosion.

His demonstration was met with complete silence, confirming his suspicion that this simple technique of spell manipulation – one that he had taught every one of his NEWT students – was not known in this world at all.

Controlling the movement of spells had been the very first collaborative project between Tom and Albus. It gave Tom a certain amount of satisfaction to know that Albus would have given up the project had he not dragged Tom into it as part of their 'detentions'.

Hermione Granger was the first to voice the class' collective thought. "But that's not possible."

"And why is that, Miss Granger?"

Granger frowned. "You cannot control spells. It is a fundamental rule of magic."

Tom smiled. "That's right, you can't control spells, but does that make what I've done impossible? I did not control the spell directly, I merely suggest how it should move the same way your direct a fork to move and dance in your Transfigurations class." He paused, waiting for the inevitable question.

"But how can you transfigure a spell?"

"Despite what most wizards tend to believe, the casting of a spell isn't complete after it leaves your wand. Until the effect of the spell ends, it is connected to your magic. That's the reason the original caster of a spell can remove its effects much easier than anyone else," explained Tom. "This connection doesn't only limit to ending a spell, it also allows you to manipulate it. You can't change the nature of a spell - meaning you can't control it directly or turn it into an entirely different spell – but you can always affect it with magic, including Transfiguration."

The rest of the lesson was spent explaining the theory behind the little trick that was in reality a 'light' variation of a similar technique that was usually found in Dark Rituals. The staff in this school would definitely protest when they knew what Tom had taught the students. Of course, that would require them to first realize that Tom had combined an element – a generally harmless but very useful element - of the Dark Arts with Transfiguration. Highly unlikely.

"We will begin the practical part next week," said Tom as the bell rang, signaling the end of the class. "What you are going to do is to combine a spell with a color-changing charm. I'm sure you can all imagine its effects and usefulness."

He watched as his students left the classroom. Most of them looked excited, even Harry Potter seemed interested at what Tom was teaching him for once. Draco Malfoy was the last student to leave the room. He looked even paler than usual and the way he walked betrayed his exhaustion.

Tom waited several seconds after the boy had left before walking up to the doorway. The last class of the day was over, but Draco was heading up the stairs instead of down towards the Slytherin common room. It was nothing out of the ordinary, but Tom knew Draco well enough to tell that something was seriously wrong.

Tom walked back into the classroom once Draco had disappeared from sight. He took his time to clear up his desk and skimmed through a few essays the students had just handed in. Then, deciding that he had given the boy enough time to reach his destination, he closed his eyes and reached out with his mind to the many wards around Hogwarts. The magic around the ancient castle responded, recognizing him as the heir of a founder. He mentally enquired the location of Draco Malfoy, a student in his house, and received a most curious answer.

What was Draco doing in the Room of Requirement?

Tom's thought went to the incident in Hogsmeade. It had been nearly a week and they still had yet to find out what had really happened when Rosmerta died. Was Draco's odd behavior somehow related to the incident?

Deciding that there was only one way to find out the answer, Tom left the classroom and headed towards the seventh floor corridor.

Tom had a long history with the Malfoys in his world. Raised in a pureblood family, Abraxas Malfoy had learned from a young age to be proud of his name. He had also inherited the values that many purebloods shared. So when Tom, the heir of Salazar Slytherin, offered him a place in the war to regain what ought to be theirs from

the hands of those without a taint of magical blood in their veins, Abraxas had answered the call immediately, as had several others.

Tom didn't know how his original 'followers' had reacted when they finally figured out that the war wasn't happening. Perhaps they had been outraged, perhaps they had been confused, either way it didn't matter much since Tom had left Britain right after graduation and he had little use for devoted followers by that point.

When he returned from his sudden disappearance four years later, Abraxas Malfoy had been one of the first who sought him out, offering his support in the new path that Tom had chosen for himself. It was Abraxas' way to ensure that however the world changed because of Tom – and Abraxas never seemed to have any doubt that Tom would change the world, one way or another - the Malfoys would always be on the favored side.

Of course, Tom never bothered telling Abraxas that changing the wizarding world had never been as important to him as ruling it. In fact, none of the fools who had followed him years ago seemed to have realized that they – and their self-acclaimed superiority - had been nothing but convenient tools in Tom's – in Voldemort's – game to gain power.

Later, as Slytherin's head of house, Tom had taken it upon himself to eliminate the same weaknesses that he himself had once exploited, starting with Abraxas Malfoy's son.

As a child, Lucius Malfoy had learned to be proud of his name, but he had also learned not to blindly believe everything his father taught him. By the time Abraxas found out what Tom had done to his son, Lucius had already developed a set of values that was, according to his father, quite 'unbefitting for a Malfoy'. It was a shame that Abraxas died a few years before his son managed to prove himself worthy of his family name by making Minister of Magic.

While Tom and Abraxas were acquaintances at best, Lucius had always viewed Tom as a mentor and respected him as such. Over the years, Lucius had become one of the few that Tom would call a friend. As a result, Tom had gotten to know young Draco Malfoy very well. So well, in fact, that he was able to tell almost every time when something was troubling the boy, or when the boy was creating trouble.

Or when the boy was creating trouble because he was in trouble, like he was now.

Tom stood invisible in the Room of Requirement, surrounded by millions of objects hidden by generations of Hogwarts inhabitants. Several feet ahead of him, Draco Malfoy was kneeling before what Tom recognized as the Vanishing Cabinet.

The sight brought up the memory of another encounter over three months ago, on the night when Tom first arrived in this world. He had unknowingly invaded his counterpart's meeting with his followers and witnessed the initiation of a new Death Eater. That new Death Eater had been kneeling on the ground like Draco was now, with the same blonde hair and of a similar age.

It could be a mere coincidence, but the fact remained that Draco Malfoy was definitely planning something. What could it be? And why was Draco so desperate to repair the broken Vanishing Cabinet?

And there was no question that Draco was desperate. Beyond desperate. The frustration and hopelessness – an emotion that Tom would never associate with Draco Malfoy- on his face suggested he was pressured or threatened into doing whatever he needed the Vanishing Cabinet for.

Was Voldemort behind this? Was Draco the Death Eater that Tom had seen in the forest months ago? Then another question emerged. If Draco was indeed the new Death Eater, what could he possibly offer Voldemort?

Tom needed more information. It was probably a good time now to find out more about what had happened to the Malfoys in this world. All he knew at the moment was that Lucius Malfoy was currently in Azkaban – a fact that would no doubt shock the Lucius in Tom's world to the core - for being a Death Eater.

Draco didn't stay in the Room of Requirement for long. He left after trying, and failing, to repair the Vanishing Cabinet for the fifth time. Tom watched him go without announcing his presence. He would decide whether or not he needed to interfere once he knew more about the situation.

Once the door closed behind Draco, Tom removed the invisibility charm on himself and walked over to the broken Vanishing Cabinet. It wasn't clear how the it had been damaged, but -

Tom's head snapped up, all thoughts of examining the Vanishing Cabinet forgotten as his eyes quickly scanned the room for what he knew must be in there, in the Room of Requirement, in Hogwarts.

What was Voldemort thinking?

He cautiously walked past the Vanishing Cabinet. The pain that had suddenly erupted from his scar intensified when he turned into the left alleyway.

Where was it?

He stopped before a large cupboard with blistered surface and once again he scanned the many objects around him. He knew at once what it was the moment his gaze fell upon it.

An old and discolored tiara was lying among the junk on the floor like a piece of useless trash, only it wasn't. It couldn't be. Voldemort would never choose something so ordinary, unless-

Tom dropped to one knee next to the tiara, inspecting it closely but never touching it.

Despite the searing pain coursing through his body, he couldn't help feeling a sudden surge of excitement when he saw the words 'Wit beyond measure is man's greatest treasure' etched upon the tiara. He didn't know where Voldemort had found it, but lying on the floor before him was Rowena Ravenclaw's diadem.

As well as a Horcrux.

His initial excitement faded at that thought. A Horcrux at Hogwarts, in a room where everyone could enter freely, where generations of students had been hiding their treasures. Tom shook his head. Did Voldemort want his Horcrux found?

Tom could only guess why his counterpart considered the Room of Requirement a good place to hide a piece of his soul, but there was

no doubt in his mind what he should do with it. After witnessing how the locket had been destroyed last time, he knew he couldn't bring it to Albus. He - Tom Riddle - would not be the reason for Voldemort's destruction. The best way would be to leave the Horcrux where it was and-

Do you think you can just turn away? I know who you are, I know you are from another world.

Tom started as a familiar voice spoke in his mind, correctly naming where he came from. During a similar encounter last time with Slytherin's locket, the piece of Voldemort's soul hadn't been able to tell who he was even though it had recognized him as someone having an identical soul. But the piece of soul inside Ravenclaw's heirloom had obviously found out more. How?

Of course, Tom realized, eye contact. He had already come to the conclusion that the power of Occlumency was severely reduced when it was used to ward off an attack from a person – or an object – with the same soul. He had been staring at the tiara for a while now and the extra advantage of having direct eye contact had given Voldemort's soul a chance to read his mind.

He quickly added several layers of protection around his mind and pushed himself to his feet. Now was not the best time to deal with the abandoned soul fragment, especially since he had little idea how much it had seen in his mind. He would come back for it when he was more prepared. With this unexpected discovery, he should be able to finally test his theories on identical souls.

He was about to leave when he felt a presence attacking his Occlumency shield. It couldn't get into his mind, but instead of retreating, the presence edged close to the surface of his mental shield and literally leached onto it - a basic technique in possession.

"Never give up, do you?" muttered Tom. He worked to shove the presence out of his mind, but stopped when Voldemort's voice spoke up in his mind again.

You think you are above me, don't you? You think you are the better one because you've made a choice to turn 'good', which we both know is nothing but an act.

Tom glanced at the tiara on the ground. "Do you think I care what you have to say?" he said. "It seems you still haven't fully grasped your situation, Voldemort. I can easily destroy you right here and now."

But you won't. You can never bring yourself to destroy me.

"Don't tempt me," said Tom coldly. If the soul fragment was convinced that Tom was not going to destroy the Horcrux, then what was it trying to do now?

He subtly manipulated the magic around his mental shield and weaved it around the invading presence in his mind. He froze when the intention of Voldemort's soul became clear to him.

You won't even tell Dumbledore where you've seen me because you loathe him. Not only because he has used you to destroy my soul, but also because it was him – the other him - who turned you into what you are now.

Tom narrowed his eyes. Dark amusement slipped into Voldemort's voice as it pressed on.

I know you better than anyone, Tom Riddle. We're both excellent actors and we're good at letting the world see what we want them to see. Only this time you've become so engrossed in your acting that you're fooling even yourself, you're starting to believe you've actually changed. But we both know that it's not true, don't we? For years you've forced yourself to act in a way that Dumbledore would approve, but deep down you are still the same. You never changed, you never can.

Before he knew what he was doing, Tom had pulled out his wand and pointed it at Voldemort's Horcrux. "One more word and I'll gladly end your miserable existence."

If anything, the voice in Tom's head sounded even more amused.

Even now, your soul is protesting. It is repelling the mask you've put on for so long to hide your true nature. Can't you see? Your lies are destroying you from within and it is only a matter of time-

Tom gritted his teeth and forcefully pushed Voldemort's presence out of his mind. With a frustrated sigh, he lowered his wand and turned away from where the tiara was lying unassumingly among the junk on the floor.

The intention of Voldemort's soul was clear - to wake up the monster within Tom, or to break him in the case that the monster failed to respond. Tom would have laughed at the notion had he not heard the firm conviction in Voldemort's voice – a firm conviction that it could be done.

He knew he shouldn't be bothered by it. After all, words were the only weapon that Voldemort's Horcrux could use against him. But despite his attempt to ignore this whole encounter, what his counterpart had said with his own voice stayed with him for a long time after the door of the Room of Hidden Things closed behind him.

Chapter 16: Murderers

"Have you ever felt sorry for what you've done, Tom?"

Tom looked up from his book. "What brought this up all of a sudden?"

"Have you?" pressed Albus.

Tom frowned. "Why do you think I handed myself over to the Ministry? I didn't spend time in Azkaban for fun, Albus."

"I know, but admitting you were wrong isn't the same as actually feeling remorse."

"Why does it matter?" asked Tom, starting to get annoyed. "I've changed. The fact that I agreed to teach here more than proves it."

"Yes, and you're doing a good job teaching the students, even though they did complain about you being too harsh on them."

"Just what are you trying to say, Albus?"

"Horace came to me yesterday with a proposal," said Albus after a short pause.

That caught Tom's attention. "And?" he asked eagerly.

Albus studied him for a while, then said, "I think it's still too soon for you."

"Horace agreed that I'm ready," countered Tom. "He's even willing to give up his position. You trusted me to teach them, I don't see why -"

"The students are directly influenced by their head of house," said Albus. "You'll be responsible to take care of them and to guide them. You'll have to teach them much more than what you do in classes now, Tom, and that knowledge has little to do with magic."

"I can handle the responsibility," said Tom.

Albus shook his head. "It isn't about the additional responsibility, Tom. The children are observant, especially the Slytherins. If they are to learn some of their most important lessons in life from you, then words alone are not enough, you have to mean what you teach them."

"And you don't think I do. Why, because I don't feel sorry for what I've done?" said Tom in a mocking way.

Albus sighed. "After all these years –"

"After all these years," Tom interrupted with growing anger, "you should have already realized who you've been dealing with. It's never about feeling regret, it's all just about me wanting a better life." He clenched his fists unconsciously. "Years ago, I promised you that I would not allow myself to become a monster. I still mean it. Isn't that enough?" A hint of desperation slipped into his voice in the last sentence.

"It is for me, Tom," said Albus softly, eyeing Tom with sadness in his eyes. "It is for me."

Tom gritted his teeth, now feeling thoroughly digested with his own outburst as his anger began to disperse.

"Very well," said Albus unexpectedly, causing Tom to turn his attention back to him. "You've convinced me, Professor Riddle."

"Convinced you of- " Tom stopped, staring at Albus in astonishment. "You'll make me Head of Slytherin?"

Albus nodded.

"What changed your mind?"

"A simple fact that you've taught me years ago," answered Albus.

"And that is?"

Albus smiled faintly, but did not answer. Tom shot the old man a suspicious glance, but decided it was pointless to press on. He got what he wanted and he wasn't about to complain.

Tom stood at the top of the Astronomy Tower, lost in thought. Dwelling on the past was a waste of time as far as he was concerned, but he found himself doing it more and more lately. He wasn't sure if it was good sign or not, but he found it oddly important that he remembered the events that made him who he was now.

Tom liked to think that it had nothing to do with him meeting his evil counterpart, but as much as he would like to deny it, his last encounter with Voldemort's Horcrux a week ago had left him shaken and uneasy. Some of what Voldemort had said was true, and Tom would be lying if he said he wasn't at all worried by Voldemort's attempts to 'recruit' him. It had always been his fear of the monster he might become that forced him to change, but just how much had he changed? How easy would it be for him to become -

Tom scowled as he realized where his thoughts had led him... again. It had been fifty years since he had vowed to never let himself become a monster and Salazar help him if he keep letting said monster's words affect him.

But wasn't that exactly what Albus had said to him years ago before he was made Head of Slytherin? Tom had slowly come to realize why Albus found it so important he felt sorry for his actions. Because as long as he remained remorseless over what he had done, his soul would remain as it had been, maimed and unwanted, and the monster that was Voldemort would always be within him, waiting for its chance to return.

Had he ever felt sorry for anything he had done? He didn't know and he wasn't sure he wanted to know.

Letting out a weary sigh, Tom looked up at the dark sky and pushed his thoughts aside. It was getting late. He had arranged a meeting with Snape and it would not do to miss it because he was brooding at the top of the Astronomy Tower.

Tom lit up his wand and slowly made his way back to his office. It was already past curfew. The whole castle was dark and quiet – a stark contrast to the lively atmosphere during the day.

The silence was broken, however, when a faint sobbing sound reached Tom's ears on the forth floor, reminding him of the troubles that came with being a professor.

He reluctantly stopped in front of the narrow corridor next to the library, then slowly walked into it when he felt Hogwarts beckoning him forward. Curled up against the wall was a small figure. His shoulders were trembling as he sobbed into his arms. When the light of Tom's wand fell onto him, he tensed and looked up hesitantly.

"P- professor!" His tear-filled eyes widened in fear at the sight of Tom.

"Mr. Gibbon." Tom slowly approached the Slytherin first year, but stopped when he saw the boy edging away from him. "Don't be afraid. I'm not accusing you of anything."

"Professor Kray, I- I don't-" Gibbon ducked his head and desperately tried to wipe his eyes with his sleeve, but tears kept rolling down his cheeks despite his effort.

A sudden sound coming from behind him caught Tom attention and he quickly glanced over his shoulder, but whatever had caused it was nowhere in sight.

Turning back to Gibbon, Tom took a few cautious steps forward then sat down on the floor next to the boy. He gently put a hand on Gibbon's shoulder. The boy flinched, but Tom did not withdraw his hand. He knew from experience that the boy would either stop crying for dignity sake or give in and accept the offered comfort. Judging from how the boy was trembling -

"You're not expected to handle everything on your own, Brutus."

Tom purposefully used Gibbon's first name and was not surprised when the boy finally gave in. With an inward sigh, Tom held the boy close as he cried himself to exhaustion.

Idly, Tom thought of his arranged meeting with Snape. He wouldn't be able to attend it now, that's for sure. He probably should notify the Potions Master, but with one of Snape's supposed charges crying in his arms, Tom didn't quite feel like it. It would be quite a sight to see a livid Severus Snape standing in front of his office, waiting for him.

Draco walked tiredly down the stairs leading to the dungeons. He had stayed out later than usual today, working in the Room of Requirement. But what use had that be? He had already tried everything he could think of to repair the Vanishing Cabinet, but nothing seemed to work. He was beginning to doubt if it could even be fixed at all.

It was frustrating, especially since he was only one step away from completing his mission... or was he?

How simple it had seemed to be when he was making his plans at home that summer. Now everything just seemed hopelessly impossible. What if the Vanishing Cabinet was truly beyond repair? Even if he did fix it, could he really overpower Dumbledore with the aids of the other Death Eaters? Could he really bring himself to kill when the chance presented itself?

He couldn't. The answer was plain and simple.

Ever since the incident at Hogsmeade, he had been plagued by nightmares almost every night, dreaming of Rosmerta's death. No matter how many times he told himself that it had just been an accident, that he was not responsible for her death, night after night he still woke up screaming in horror.

Draco was not a fool. Deep down he already knew that continuing this mission would be pointless. He wouldn't be able to kill Dumbledore even when he finally had the chance.

But what other choice did he have? If he failed this mission, the Dark Lord would kill him and his parents. He couldn't let that happen.

Draco's step faltered. He didn't notice the flickering light glowing in the distance until it was too late.

"Mr. Malfoy."

Quickly masking his shock, Draco looked up to see Snape walking towards him with an oil lamp in his hand. He had a nasty sneer on his face and he looked even more annoyed than usual.

Snape didn't even bother asking why he was out of bed. "Come." He gestured Draco to follow him.

Draco remained unmoved. "And why should I?"

"Don't try my patience, Draco," Snape warned.

Draco merely stared back at his head of house coldly. If Snape still believed that he had power over him-

A hand suddenly seized Draco's arm and roughly pulled him into the nearest classroom. Snape closed the door behind them and cast a quick silencing spell around the room.

"What do you think you are doing?" exclaimed Draco.

Snape snarled. "Quit acting like a child, Draco. You're getting careless, wandering around at night without any backup. What if you get caught?"

"Spare me your lectures," spat Draco. "If you don't have anything else to say-"

"I'm only trying to help, Draco."

"I don't need your help!"

"Don't need my help," Snape repeated coldly. "Do you even realize what kind of trouble you're in? What you've done with the necklace was clumsy and foolish. Rosmerta's death has caught the attention of both Dumbledore and the Ministry. It's going to make things much harder for us-"

"There's never an us!" shouted Draco. Snape's cold apathy towards Rosmerta's death made him sick. "It is my job, he gave it to me. I've got a plan and it's going to work," he lied.

"What is your plan?" pressed Snape.

"It's none of your business!"

"I swore to your mother I would protect you, Draco. I made the Unbreakable Vow," said Snape as though Draco didn't already know. "If you tell me what you are trying to do, I can assist you."

Draco was not going to fall for that. "For the last time, I don't need your help."

Without waiting for Snape's reply, he strode towards the door, yanked it open, and left the room without sparing his head of house another glance. Snape, cautious as ever, wouldn't make a scene by chasing after him. Nevertheless, Draco didn't stop until he was far away from the classroom.

Once he was certain Snape was not following him, Draco leaned back against the cold wall of the dungeons and closed his eyes. He had no doubt that Snape's true intention was not to help him, but to steal his glory. It was common knowledge that Snape hated being a teacher at Hogwarts and would jump at any chance to prove himself worthy of serving by the Dark Lord's side. Draco was not going to give him the chance.

He should probably thank Snape for helping him make up his mind though. The conversation just now had made it clear that his original plan was not an option. He was not a killer. He would never become some disgusting monster like Snape.

But he would find a way to keep his family safe nonetheless.

He was a Slytherin and a Malfoy, he would find a way to out of this. He had to, one way or another.

A plan began to form in his mind as his thoughts drifted to the Gibbon boy and what he had witnessed in the hallway earlier that night. It seemed that pathetic weakling might have his uses after all.

The boy stared into the cup doubtfully. He took a tentative sip, blinked, then took another.

Tom smirked and leaned back on the couch in his room. After having to comfort a student in the middle of the night more times than he cared to count, he had long mastered the art of making a perfect cup of hot chocolate. The student tended to trust him more if they knew he was making it himself instead of ordering it straight from the kitchen.

Gibbon had stopped crying a while ago, but he still had yet to explain his distress. Whatever troubling him must be serious enough

for him – a Slytherin – to break down completely and seek comfort from someone who was just a step above a stranger. He had not even protested when Tom dragged him away from the cold corridor, where anyone could have stumbled upon them.

Of course, now that the boy had calmed down, he looked as though he wanted nothing more than to erase the memory of the whole incident from his Defense professor's mind, and most likely his own too.

Setting down the now empty cup on the table, Gibbon licked his lips. "Sir, about what happened, I-" He fidgeted in his seat. "Could you-"

"I don't plan on telling anyone what I've seen tonight, Brutus," said Tom. He gave the boy a few seconds to collect himself before asking gently, "Do you wish to talk about it?"

Gibbon dropped his gaze and shook his head.

"Is there anyone you wish to talk to? Your head of house, perhaps?"

"No!" Gibbon's head snapped up, his fear was evident on his face.

Tom hadn't expected such a strong reaction. Could Snape be responsible for the boy's distress?

Gibbon's face reddened at his outburst. "It's nothing serious, sir, really," he said, almost pleadingly. "I can deal with it on my own."

Everything about the boy - from his tone to his posture – spoke the contrary, though it was clear that he did not wish to share any of his problems with Tom.

Tom weighted his options. Should he force the boy to talk to him, or should he simply let it go? He didn't yet know this particular snake well enough to make the best decision, but he did know that getting too involved with this world's affairs would only end up causing him more headaches in the future. He didn't come to this world just so he could take over Severus Snape's duty as Slytherin's Head of house after all.

"Very well, then. You may go," said Tom finally. "But remember, at Hogwarts, you are not expected to handle everything on your own. Find someone you can trust and talk to them."

Gibbon jumped out of his seat, looking relieved. Tom, however, hadn't missed the way the boy's shoulder slumped at his last statement. The boy truly seemed to have no one to turn to.

"You know where to find me if you need anything," Tom added, knowing at once that he was going to regret this offer. Getting involved with the students' personal lives was the last thing he needed in this world.

Gibbon paused when he reached the doorway and slowly turned around to face Tom.

"Professor?"

"Yes, what is it?" encouraged Tom. Yes, he knew he was going to regret it.

Gibbon hesitated, then blurted out, "Are the muggleborns really that different from us?"

Tom raised an eyebrow. He had not expected this question. "You are a pureblood, aren't you, Brutus?"

"Six generations from my father's side and four from my mother's," Gibbon recited. His confusion overshadowed his pride.

"And you seem certain that I'm not a muggleborn."

"Everyone knows that you're powerful, sir, there's no way-" Gibbon replied swiftly before starting to look uncertain. "Professor, you're not-"

"It has never been proven that a wizard's power has anything to do with his blood," said Tom. "But for your information, I'm a half-blood." He paused. "As is Voldemort, for that matter."

"What?"

Tom smirked. "That little detail aside, being a pureblood does give you certain advantages over the others. You are exposed to magic from a young age and you, through your parents, already have the social connections necessary to guarantee you a place in this world. But whether you can make the best of these advantages ultimately depends on you, not your family. You've been having classes with the muggleborn students for two months now. Have you found any huge differences between you and them?"

Gibbon frowned at having the question thrown back at him. He thought for a moment then answered carefully, "They learn slower than we do and they ask stupid questions in classes." He paused. "But there's nothing so wrong about them that- that make it right for us to – to- "

"Kill them all," finished Tom quietly. Finally, the boy's behavior was starting to make sense.

Gibbon nodded, staring down at his shoes, looking miserable. Tom would have asked the boy to take a seat, but Gibbon seemed more willing to talk when he was standing in front of the only exit in the room.

"There's certainly nothing wrong with them," agreed Tom. "Given enough time for them to adapt, they'll be just like you and me."

Gibbon looked up. "Is that a bad thing, sir?"

Tom tilted his head. The boy seemed desperate for something to hold onto as the world he had lived in for eleven years turned upside-down around him. Tom was not going to give him that lifeline.

"You'll have to find out the answer on your own," he said. "My advice is to give it some time before you attempt to answer it."

A hint of annoyance crossed Gibbon's eyes when Tom refused to give him a straight answer. "But if they are... just like us, then what is this war about? I mean, why would the Dark Lord and the Death Eaters want to-" He shook his head. "I don't understand."

Oh, Tom understood perfectly what made Voldemort kill; it was the ultimate display of power, was it not? Tom also knew that had he

wanted, he could persuade countless 'innocents' to go into battle for him, to kill for him.

"There has always been a certain level of hatred between the pureblood families and those they believe are inferior to them," Tom ignored Gibbon's discomfort and continued, "Voldemort used that hatred and turned it into his personal war to gain power. He manipulated his followers into believing that they are actually fighting to regain what should have been theirs and that they are in fact doing the 'right thing'."

"So he's only using them?" asked Gibbon.

"I believe Voldemort did offer them power in return as a way to control them more completely, but in the end they are nothing but disposable tools to him."

Gibbon looked sick. "But how do you know about this, sir?"

"I know Voldemort very well, unfortunately," said Tom. "We've known each other ever since we were children. He's been trying to turn me to his side for years."

"But you didn't join him."

"No, or I wouldn't be here right now," said Tom. "But many years ago, I was no better than Voldemort."

Gibbon looked up at him in surprise. "What do you mean, sir?"

This was new for Tom. In his world, the fact that he had killed his father and grandparents in cold blood was common knowledge.

"Do you remember the time I tortured a baby unicorn in front of your class?" he asked. "I seem to remember you being rather unsatisfied when it turned out to be 'just for show'."

Gibbon's face reddened. "I didn't mean that, sir."

Tom waved his hand dismissively then turned serious again. "There were times when I would gladly do that 'show' for real if I knew it would gain me what I wanted," he said. "I have done things that many would consider monstrous and unforgivable. When I finally

realized how wrong I was, I was already close completely destroying myself."

Gibbon looked stunned. "What happened then?" he asked quietly.

"I would have ignored the signs and refused to acknowledge that something was seriously wrong with me," admitted Tom. "I would have become Voldemort's strongest ally because I couldn't see any other choice for myself. But someone stepped in at that point and helped me. He accepted me for what I was even though he knew very well what I had done, and he showed me that I did have another choice – by realizing my mistakes and starting anew. It had taken him a long time, but in the end he managed to save me." Gibbon stared at him in wonder and Tom smiled. "Should you want to, Brutus, you can do the same."

Gibbon's eyes widened, confirming Tom's guess that the boy had just found out his father was a Death Eater.

Williamson in Gryffindor had withdrawn from school yesterday because his father had died in St. Mungos'. If Tom remembered correctly, the Gryffindor had once named Gibbon's father as the attacker, now the murderer. Gibbon seemed to have confirmed that accusation somehow, most likely from a message from home.

Of course, Tom then realized, that was why the boy refused to talk to Snape, who was a Death Eater himself.

"He won't listen," said Gibbon softly, staring at the floor.

"If he cares for you," said Tom, "then you are the only person in the world that he will listen to."

None of them ever acknowledged who 'he' was. It was safer this way.

Gibbon looked up dubiously. "And if he doesn't?"

"Then," Tom took a step forward and rested a hand on the boy's shoulder, "you'll have to accept that he's made his choice, and that you've done your best."

Gibbon's shoulders slumped, but there was a grim determination in his eyes. Tom hoped the boy wouldn't be too disappointed if his father refused to leave Voldemort, which was more than likely.

"Feel better now?"

Gibbon gave him a small smile and nodded. "Thank you, professor." He paused. "You won't tell anyone what happened here, will you?"

"No," promised Tom. "I'm afraid that is the only assurance you're going to get. I'm not making an unbreakable vow for that."

Gibbon chuckled. "That's all right, sir. I trust you."

Tom raised an eyebrow.

"Well, sir, we all know you hate Snape," Gibbon explained. "You are clearly not on the Dark Lord's side and you don't seem to trust Dumbledore as much as you appear to be."

Tom merely smirked in respond. He turned the boy around and pushed him gently towards the door. "Leave now, it's getting late. Don't think I won't give you detention if I find you coming to my class late tomorrow morning."

"I wouldn't dare, sir," was the boy's cheeky reply as he slipped out of the door, looking significantly happier than before, even though the dark clouds surrounding him had not dispersed one bit.

Tom dropped back onto the couch once the door closed behind the boy. Why did he have a feeling that he had taken on a responsibility he would rather not have?

Back in Gryffindor Tower, Harry Potter woke up with a start. His scar was burning.

Voldemort was very angry right now.

Harry struggled to remember anything that might be important from his dream, now quickly fading away from his memory.

Voldemort had been searching for something. Something valuable. But whatever he had been searching for had been removed. Voldemort had been furious, and scared.

Harry knew he had to tell Dumbledore what he had just seen, even though a small part of him doubted Dumbledore would find this information useful. After all, there were probably thousands of stone shacks out there that was similar to the one Voldemort had just visited and Harry couldn't even tell what Voldemort had been so desperately searching for.

'I'll tell Ron and Hermione first thing tomorrow morning,' he thought before closing his eyes again. 'Then I'll tell Dumbledore.'

Chapter 17: Simple Deduction

A person could have countless counterparts in other worlds, but they all existed as separate entities, each with their own mind and body. Under different circumstances, these different entities of the same person could end up being very different. But however large their differences might be, their souls always remained the same, and the identical souls always attracted each other.

For a person to overcome the force that bound him to his own world and travel to another there must be an Anchor – an external attractive force originated from the other world. Tom's Anchor was the connection between his soul and that of his counterpart's. It had taken him a long time to amplify that connection just enough to activate his portkey and bring him to this world.

The fact that Voldemort had split his soul into seven parts explained why Tom had felt as though he was being torn apart upon his arrival. But even though he had amplified the natural connection between his soul and Voldemort's, the force of attraction should still be far too weak to be noticeable, let alone cause him physical pain.

Tom knew that something was missing in his research and he had a dreadful feeling that he knew just what that was. After all, against his better judgement, he had deliberately left out one factor – one key factor, from the look of it - in his calculation.

There was one easy way to get the answers he wanted. Voldemort had left a piece of his soul inside Hogwarts, conveniently giving Tom the best recourse he could find to thoroughly test just what was happening between his soul and Voldemort's. And yet -

Tom frowned and looked up from his research notes when he felt a subtle warning from Hogwarts. Someone was approaching his office.

It was almost curfew and Tom could count the number of people who would visit him at this hour on one hand, even with Voldemort added to the list.

He waved his hand and opened the door just in time to see his visitor preparing to knock. Now that was a surprise, he had been expecting Snape.

"What brings you here, Albus?"

Severus tiredly walked up the spiral staircase that led to the Headmaster's office. The meeting with the Dark Lord had been short, but painful. He had been put under the Cruciatus Curse for so long that he could barely stand. The Dark Lord was very angry today and Severus – along with the other Death Eaters present in the meeting - were the ones who suffered.

Severus was long used to the after-effect of the Cruciatus Curse though, and he had no problem masking his pain until after he had given his report to Dumbledore.

The door to the Headmaster's office opened the moment Severus reached the top of the staircase. He walked into the office, but stopped when he noticed that the Headmaster was not alone.

"Come in, Severus," said Dumbledore, smiling. "We've been waiting for you."

Severus kept his face blank as he took the empty seat in front of the desk. Sitting next to him was the man Severus had just been ordered by Dark Lord – after a round of torture - to capture at all cost.

Thomas Kray was staring at him with a knowing look in his eyes, almost as though he knew exactly what Severus had gone through.

"Tough night, Professor Snape?" Kray drawled.

Severus responded with a glare. Just how much did Kray know about Severus' involvement in the war? Dumbledore next words answered his question.

"Why don't you start by telling us what you've learned from Voldemort, Severus?"

Severus turned his glare to Dumbledore, who apparently had once again gone around telling everyone that he was a spy without first informing him. But now was not the time to deal with Dumbledore, not with Kray in the room.

"The Dark Lord just ordered me to bring Kray to him before Christmas. I was given permission to do whatever necessary to complete the mission, including jeopardizing my supposed position here as his spy." Severus paused, taking in Dumbledore's calm expression. Kray's presence in the room could not be a coincidence. "You knew this was going to happen, didn't you?"

Dumbledore merely nodded without offering any kind of explanation. "Is there anything else?"

Severus glanced sideways at Kray. "The Dark Lord is very angry at something he discovered last night. He didn't say what it was, but clearly he held Kray responsible."

"Why, I was busy playing the caring teacher last night, however that might offend your Dark Lord is beyond me," said Kray, completely unperturbed by the news.

Dumbledore gave Kray a curious look before addressing them both. He had clearly found out what had happened the night before from his many unknown sources.

"Last night, Voldemort decided to pay the Gaunt house a visit and found a certain ring missing," said Dumbledore slowly. "A short while later he found that a locket of his had also been somehow misplaced."

Contrary to Severus, Kray seemed to know exactly what Dumbledore was talking about.

"Are you telling me he didn't know about you hunting them down until yesterday?" said Kray, appearing shocked for the first time since Severus had met him.

"No, he didn't," said Dumbledore.

Calmly, he opened the drawer of his desk and took out what were obviously the two objects the Dark Lord had mysteriously misplaced. Severus recognized one of them at once as the ring Dumbledore had brought back to Hogwarts in the summer. The same ring that carried the curse he and Kray had been trying to break. The other object was a badly damaged locket.

"For a long time, I've been trying to find out Voldemort's secret to immortality. The answer became clear to me three years ago after the Chamber of Secrets was opened for the second time."

Severus didn't understand what the two seemingly worthless objects on the desk had to do with immortality, but he knew very well the significance of what Dumbledore was about to say. Finally, the key to end it all.

Beside him, Kray had leaned back lazily in his chair as though he already knew the answer and was anticipating Severus' reaction. The supposed researcher looked relaxed, but Severus had spent enough time around him to be fooled.

Pushing his observation aside for later thoughts, Severus turned his attention back to Dumbledore. Despite himself, he was eager to finally receive some answers.

"Do you know what a Horcrux is, Severus?"

Severus drew in a sharp breath at that word. He glanced at the ring and broken locket on the desk, knowing now exactly what they must be. "They are the Dark Lord's... Horcruxes?"

Dumbledore nodded. "They were."

"He actually made two of them," said Severus, unable to conceal his disbelief. "Is that even possible?"

Horcrux creation was considered some of the darkest magic to have ever existed, and rightly so. Severus had only read about it once and what little he had read made him sick.

"It generally becomes easier with each one you make."

Severus turned sharply at Kray, who had chosen that inappropriate moment to spout off one of his many theories. But the snide comment died on Severus' lips when he met Kray's eyes. The pair of deep blue eyes had a look that Severus had never seen before. For the first time, Severus could see in them glimpses of who the man really was beneath the many layers of disguise, and what he saw sent a shiver down his spine.

"And he made six," Kray continued, "not two."

Six? Severus glanced at Dumbledore, who nodded grimly in confirmation.

"As long as Voldemort's Horcruxes remain, he cannot be truly defeated," said Dumbledore. "As you may have guessed by now, Severus, I've been trying to locate all of them for quite some time."

"The Dark Lord seems to believe it was Kray's doing," said Severus.

Dumbledore nodded. "Voldemort did not know that I'm aware of his secret and I was hoping to delay the moment of his finding out for as long as possible. But it seems, once again, things have taken an unexpected turn." He glanced at Kray. "Voldemort's sudden visit to the hiding places of his Horcruxes was not a coincidence, Tom. I fear he has come to a wrong conclusion about your sudden appearance."

There was a moment of silence, then-

"For Salazar's sake," muttered Kray. Severus raised an eyebrow at his choice of a curse. "He thinks I'm one of his Horcruxes?"

Dumbledore nodded. "That would be my guess," he said. "And since you're staying here at Hogwarts –"

"He naturally came to the conclusion that you've somehow turned me against him and that I was the one who told you his secrets," finished Kray with clear dismay. "It's not an unreasonable deduction, I admit."

Deduction, the word resonated in Severus' mind as pieces of the puzzle began to come together.

"I see my presence here have just ruined your perfect plan, Albus. My apology," said Kray. The slight smirk on his face more than cancelled out the effect of his words.

As Severus had expected, Dumbledore simply let the blatant disrespect slide. Severus had never seen anyone interact with Dumbledore the way Kray had. It almost looked as though Dumbledore was afraid to do anything that might drive Kray away

from the school and Severus would bet anything that Kray was well aware of that fact. But why would Dumbledore consider Kray as so great a threat? And, for that matter, why would the Dark Lord?

Severus' mind went back to the earlier conversation. The Dark Lord had somehow mistaken Kray as one of his Horcruxes. That claim was pure absurdity, and yet Kray had considered it a reasonable mistake.

For a supposed researcher, Kray was more dangerous than all but two wizards Severus had met. And his knowledge in the Dark Arts –

Some time during Severus' musings, Kray had turned away from Dumbledore and was now looking at him almost expectantly.

"Something you wish to ask, Professor Snape?"

Severus narrowed his eyes. "What's your real name?"

"Take a guess," said Kray.

It was absurd and made absolutely no sense, but there was only one possible answer.

"Tom Riddle."

Kray smirked. "Ten points to Slytherin."

Caught off guard by the unexpected response, it took Severus several seconds to recover from his shock. "Is this some kind of joke?" he growled.

Sitting behind the desk, Dumbledore's eyes were twinkling madly, but he neither confirmed nor denied anything. Kray's superior smirk widened.

"How about I give you the final piece of the puzzle you wanted to solve so badly, Professor Snape?" Kray paused for a moment longer than necessary then said two simple words, "Alternate universe."

Severus' eyes widened. To his annoyance, those two words did indeed solve most of the mystery. Finally the pieces began to fall

into place, forming an answer that was simply too bizarre to be true, even for Kray's standard.

"Do you honestly expect me to believe such an outrageous story?"

To that, Kray calmly replied, "Whether you believe it or not does not concern me, Severus. After all, it's you who'll need to explain to Voldemort why you fail to bring me to him."

Severus gritted his teeth. How he wished to curse the man into –

"That is enough," Dumbledore interrupted them firmly.

"Don't tell me you actually believe he's another version of the Dark Lord coming from a different world, Dumbledore."

"I found no reason to believe otherwise," said Dumbledore. "The only other explanation is the one that Voldemort has come up with and I very much doubt that any Horcrux of Voldemort's would be able to convince me that he is indeed," amused blue eyes flickered to the man in question, "the caring teacher he portrayed himself to be."

"How flattering," was Kray's dry comment.

With a soft chuckle, Dumbledore turned back to Severus. "But enough of that," he said in a tone that indicated the matter concerning Kray's identity was now closed. "It is unfortunate that Voldemort is now aware of the danger his Horcruxes are in, but with your help, Severus, we may be able to turn this to our advantage."

Knowing he was about to receive a mission, Severus' well-conditioned mind automatically blocked out the many questions and thoughts he had still yet to deal with and focused on Dumbledore's words.

"Voldemort now suspects that, with Tom's help, I've acquired the information on most, if not all, of his Horcruxes. Even though he doesn't know exactly how much I've learned, he's not going to risk leaving his Horcruxes where they have been. My guess is that in the next few days, he's going to relocate them." Dumbledore paused a moment, letting the information sink in. Severus could already guess what Dumbledore was about to ask of him. "Severus, I need you to

try to gather as much information as you can on Voldemort's whereabouts in the coming week. Contact anyone who may be of help and use any excuses you can. I'm sure I don't need to stress how important it is that we know where Voldemort hides his Horcruxes."

Severus' mind quickly ran through different options to obtain the information Dumbledore wanted. Pettigrew would be the easiest target and that worthless rat was by the Dark Lord's side more than most Death Eaters.

"And what of the Dark Lord's order?" he asked, glancing at the man sitting next to him.

"We still have time before Christmas. We should be able to come up with a possible solution by then," said Dumbledore. "For now, concentrate on searching for the Horcruxes."

Severus nodded, though he was not at all satisfied with the answer.

"I've collected several pieces of information that you may find useful, but I seem to have kept you long enough for tonight, Severus. You must be tired after the meeting," said Dumbledore. "Take a good rest tonight. We'll continue this tomorrow."

The previously forgotten pain caused by the Cruciatus Curse came back in full force with Dumbledore's words. Severus was indeed tired, but he doubted he was dismissed simply because of that. He wondered what Dumbledore wanted to discuss with Kray, or whoever the man claimed to be.

Giving Kray a particularly dark glare, Severus stood up from his chair. He waited for the sudden wave of pain that hit him to subside before turning sharply on his heels and leaving the room. However tired he was, he doubted he was going to get much sleep that night. He had much to think about.

With a last glance at the closed door behind him, Severus roughly squashed the bitterness that suddenly rose within him and strode back to the dungeons.

"I see you've enjoyed yourself, Tom."

"I've been looking forward to seeing his reaction for quite some time, I'll admit."

"And?"

"That was as entertaining as I expected it to be."

Albus shook his head in amusement. "May I ask what Severus has done to warrant such animosity?"

"Animosity is a strong word," said Tom.

"Is it now?"

Tom shot the old man an annoyed look. "I may not like Severus Snape, but I don't hate him, or he would definitely have no trouble believing who I am," he said. "My animosity is reserved for the other him in my world."

Albus raised an eyebrow. "And what has the other Severus done?"

"The one thing I despise the most," said Tom simply.

Albus looked curious, but wisely did not press on. "Despite the way you acted around Severus, you seem to trust him more now."

"He made a good spy. I can see why you found him useful," said Tom dismissively. He had had more than enough opportunity to observe and test the Potions Master during their private meetings at night. "Personally, though, I think you've made a grave mistake putting him in charge of Slytherin."

"I've told you before, Tom, it is - "

"One of the many necessary sacrifices you have made to bring Voldemort down?" said Tom, his eyes narrowing in anger. "You're supposed to protect the students, Albus, all of them. Voldemort is recruiting the Slytherins and all you've given them is a Head of house who must appear to be a loyal Death Eater at all times." He continued before Albus could reply. "Don't tell me you actually believe that once Voldemort is killed, everything that has once gone wrong will miraculously right themselves again, because the damage done to the children now can never be undone."

Albus closed his eyes briefly as if in pain. "And what would happen, Tom, when the parents of the Slytherins decide that Hogwarts is no longer suitable for their children?" he asked quietly.

"What is easy or what is right, Albus," Tom reminded the old wizard. "There are ways to save them, you know that. But because you're unwilling to change your plans, you're giving them all up without even trying."

Hints of anger entered Albus' eyes and Tom could feel power radiating off him. "That is quite enough, Tom."

"Trying to scare me off? Is that how you end all of your arguments?" Whereas Albus' staff would most likely back off by now, Tom was not afraid of the old man's power. "Face the truth, Albus. Despite what you let the world believe, you don't care what happens to them. You drag the children into this war and turn whoever is willing to fight into mindless puppets. You couldn't care less how many of them are sacrificed as long as your side emerge victorious."

For a moment Tom thought Albus was going to attack him, but seconds passed and nothing happened. Slowly, Albus' anger subsided, until nothing but weariness remained.

"I must say, I'm jealous of my counterpart in your world."

Tom raised an eyebrow. "I didn't know you enjoy being yelled at."

Albus shook his head with a sad smile. "He has an equal, Tom."

It took a moment for Tom to understand what Albus was trying to say. While some might consider it arrogant to consider oneself above others, powerful wizards and witches— especially those who did nothing to conceal their power - did tend to be looked upon differently by the rest of the community. They were respected and they were feared. Those whose power couldn't hope to match them either flocked over for protection or stayed as far away as possible out of wariness. It was an unconscious reaction – an instinct.

As unbelievable as it was, Albus craved for someone to share his burden, but his sense of responsibility – or superiority – prevented

him from doing so. Or perhaps he simply couldn't find that 'equal' he trusted enough to share his many secrets with.

Equal. Yes, that was what Tom was to the other Albus Dumbledore, wasn't he?

And indeed, that Albus did seem less of a manipulative puppet master than the one sitting before him now, not to mention happier.

Tom met Albus' eyes and they shared a moment of understanding. It was no wonder why the old man looked so tried; he was trying to fight the war alone while keeping the school together. And as far as Tom was concerned, Albus was failing the latter task horribly.

"I never thought I'd ever meet a Tom Riddle who is so protective of children," Albus commented, correctly guessing Tom's thoughts.

"Only the children that are mine," corrected Tom. "They are my charges. I'm not going to abandon any one of them."

Understanding crossed Albus' face at the word 'abandon'. "I see," he said quietly. "My counterpart has indeed made a good choice in selecting the Head of Slytherin house."

Tom could tell where Albus' thoughts dwelled. "Dwelling on what could have been is dangerous, Albus."

"But can you blame me for wondering whether there was anything I could have done, Tom?" countered Albus.

Tom winced inwardly at the direction the conversation had taken. "I've already told you that the day I killed my father was the turning point," he said carefully. "Voldemort made his first Horcrux that day. I couldn't. It has nothing to do with you, or with anyone else."

"But what caused that difference? Why couldn't you make a Horcrux?" pressed Albus. "The point where the two worlds began to drift apart happened way before that day, isn't that right, Tom?"

Tom noted with dismay that Albus seemed determined to dig out the full story of his past this time, one way or another. Not that he really minded telling Albus what had changed him – being a temporary visitor in an alternate world meant he didn't need to worry about his

words coming back to haunt him in the future – but having to comfort a guilt-ridden Albus Dumbledore was the last thing he needed.

He sighed. It was going to be a long night.

"Everything remains the same between the two worlds until my fifth year," he began. "Your counterpart caught me opening the Chamber of Secrets and made me pay for harming the students." He paused, then added, "Because of that, he became aware of what I was on my way to becoming and tried to save me."

Albus' eyes widened.

"He failed," Tom continued before Albus could make any speculation. "We both know that by the time I was sixteen, no one could have saved me even if they tried."

"But he didn't fail," said Albus quietly. "Not completely."

Tom hesitated, then nodded. "Before I came to this world, I've always assumed that his attempt to help me failed completely and what happened to me in the Riddle House had nothing to do with him at all. I was wrong. Apparently your counterpart's stubbornness has woken up something unexpected inside me."

"Remorse?" Albus whispered. The twinkles in his eyes had dimmed as he listened on.

"No," said Tom. "A complete devoid of remorse is required to split the soul into two halves. I had no trouble with that – I had craved for my father's death for years." He paused, momentarily lost in his memories. "But like all Dark Arts, it is the intention that drives the whole process of making a Horcrux. Because of your counterpart's intervention, what I had no trouble giving away in exchange for immortality before suddenly became more... valuable. My determination wasn't strong enough to sustain the spells. I went through half of the process before I lost control and my spells turned themselves back on me."

Albus looked thoughtful. "May I take a guess on what really happened that day?"

"Go ahead," said Tom, curious to know what Albus had found out.

"Your spells failed, but you didn't escape unscathed," said Albus. He leaned forward slightly and looked Tom in the eyes. "You lost half of your soul that day, didn't you, Tom?"

Inwardly, Tom was in shock. How – and for how long – had Albus figured that one out? Outwardly, his lips slowly curled up into a mirthless smile as he nodded once in confirmation.

"And you were only sixteen at that time," said Albus, a look of what seemed to be a mix between sadness and disgust crossed his face.

"Seventeen," corrected Tom calmly. "Your counterpart wouldn't leave me alone in the summer following my fifth year. I had to wait until I was of age."

That piece of information did nothing to comfort Albus. It was almost amusing how disturbed he looked, given that it had been his own guess in the first place.

"So that is why you feared what might happen to you if you continued down that path, because you already –"

"It's not that easy, Albus," said Tom quietly. "After fighting Voldemort for so many years, one would think you'd at least have an inkling of how truly messed up I was, and how impossible it was for me to turn back."

Telling Albus his past would most certainly cause the old man more harm than good, but since Albus had made it his personal goal to kill Voldemort, Tom found it important for him to understand what made the Dark Lord.

"Very well," he said, making his decision, "I will tell you my story."

Chapter 18: Burning Day

July 3, 1943

He watched, transfixed, at the rabbit struggling to free itself from the rope around its neck. The other end of the rope was tied to a rafter, suspending the pathetic creature several feet above the floor.

His deep blue eyes shone with delight as the breathing of the rabbit became shallower and shallower. His right hand fingers curled up unconsciously as he tried to imagine what it would be like if he were to use his hands instead of a rope.

Finally, the breathing stopped altogether and the body of the creature went lifelessly still. He stared down at his hands in wonderment and a wave of indescribable pleasure rushed through him -

Tom opened his eyes and raised his wand. "Expecto Patronum!"

A silvery serpent shot out from his wand. A King Cobra. With a satisfied smile, he directed the fully corporal form of his Patronus across the room to where his Transfiguration professor was standing near the door.

"I see you've perfected the spell." Dumbledore looked surprised but very pleased. "I was wondering if this would be the one spell that would finally give you trouble. Very well done indeed."

Tom's smile widened at the praise. It was not the first time Dumbledore had challenged him to perform a specific spell or master a certain technique. Most of them were in one way or another related to the projects they were working on, but it didn't escape Tom's notice that Dumbledore was also trying to occupy the rest of his free time with these little assignments. Not that Tom ever needed more than a few trials to perfect a spell - he could make any magic work for him.

"Now that you've learned the Patronus Charm, I can show you the little modification I've made to the spell," said Dumbledore. "It's a useful trick that let's you send messages with your Patronus. Even though we're unlikely to run into any dangerous situation in our trip next week, I want you to be able to contact me at any time."

Tom waved his wand and let his Patronus vanish into thin air. "Our trip next week, sir?" he asked with mild curiosity.

Dumbledore smiled, apparently expecting the question. "You are aware of my research on the different uses of dragon blood, don't you, Tom?"

Tom nodded. That was one of Dumbledore's long-term projects.

"The head of the MacFusty clan is interested in my findings and has recently sent me an invitation to visit their dragon breeding ground on the Hebrides Islands. The area is unplottable and the MacFusty family seldom accept any outsiders near their dragons, so this is going to be a valuable opportunity and a good learning experience. I have written back to inform them that I'll be bringing a student with me." Dumbledore paused for a while to let the information sink in. "While I have no doubt that you'll be able to keep yourself busy in this school for the whole summer, there are things that can't be learned from books in the library – even one as huge as Hogwarts'." Dumbledore's eyes were twinkling brightly now. "So, what do you think about a trip outside the school, Tom?"

Dumbledore looked as though he already knew Tom's answer. And indeed, Tom found little reason to refuse the offer. The idea of travelling and learning something new was very inviting.

The problem was, of course, Dumbledore's intention. It had been four months since Dumbledore had caught him opening the Chamber of the Secrets and Tom still had yet to figure out the reason behind Dumbledore's sudden change in attitude towards him. Dumbledore no longer regarded him with suspicion. Instead, he had singled Tom out and pushed him to improve his skills in a way no other professor had ever done.

But that made absolutely no sense. After all, Dumbledore had every reason to suspect him now. In fact, his suspicions that Tom was not the model student he appeared to be had all been confirmed. There was no reason for Dumbledore to want to teach him and to help him become stronger.

Tom admitted that he was puzzled and he did not like the uncertainty one bit. Still, that was not enough for him to turn down

Dumbledore's offer. This might be the chance he had been waiting for to finally figure out Dumbledore's motive.

"I would love that, sir. I'm sure it'll be a great trip."

July 18, 1943

The Hebridean Black dragon flipped its gigantic wings then took off into the sky. Running behind the flying giant were three dragon babies. The leading one – the largest and obviously strongest of the three – leaped high and flipped its wings, then flew smoothly into the sky. The second dragon was the smallest of the three and its left wing was of a smaller size than its right. It clumsily mimicked the first dragon baby, but it lost balance the moment it opened its wing and fell back onto the ground. At that moment, the third dragon baby decided it had waited long enough and launched forward, overtaking the second one and flying into the air. Being the only one left on the ground, the second dragon baby made its second attempt, which also ended in failure even though it did manage to stay longer in the air this time.

Standing a safe distance away from the dragons, two dragon keepers were clapping in support and shouting out encouragements. Tom stood behind them, watching with indifference as the dragon baby attempted to fly for the third time. It leaped into the air and for a moment it looked as though it was going to fall again, but this time it managed to regain its bearing and continued to climb higher into the sky. Tom glanced at the two cheering dragon keepers, all looking ridiculously excited for such a small accomplishment. Successfully doing what came naturally for the others after several failures was no reason for praise.

"Amazing, isn't it?"

Tom didn't turn around as Dumbledore came up from behind and stopped next to him.

"What do you think of the smallest one, Tom?"

Tom's eyes followed the small dragon flying apart from the other three. "It's doing well."

Dumbledore glanced sideways at him. "You don't mean it," he said mildly. Looking up into the sky, he chuckled as the small dragon suddenly dived towards the ground only to fly back up again at the last second. "It's never about how powerful we are, Tom," he said quietly, nodding towards the small dragon. "Look how happy it is."

All Tom saw was a worthless creature that was destined to live under the shadow of those stronger than it was. Even though it managed to overcome its birth defect and learn how to fly, it would never be able to keep up with the others.

A hand on his shoulder pulled him out of his thoughts. He turned to look at Dumbledore, half-expecting to be asked to share his opinion on the matter. But Dumbledore merely smiled and steered him away from the flying ground.

"Come on, Tom, I believe we're already late for lunch," he said. "If we hurry though, we should be back just in time for dessert."

Tom couldn't resist replying with a smirk, "You timed it that way, didn't you, sir?"

Dumbledore's wink all the confirmation Tom needed.

November 24, 1943

"Stupefy!"

Tom held his wand tightly as his spell shot across the room. He concentrated and waved his wand just before the jet of red light was about to collide with the wall. The spell abruptly turned left, then continued to fly around the room in circles. Tom waved his wand again after the spell had finished its fourth round, directing it to the front of the room, where it hit the blackboard and finally vanished.

"Merlin's beard!" Slughorn breathed, looking from Tom to Dumbledore with wide eyes. "How- that was supposed to be impossible!"

Tom found himself grinning at the look of disbelief on his Head of house's face. He turned around and saw that Dumbledore, too, was smiling widely.

"Tom was the one who worked out the most crucial part," he said.

Such a small-scaled project was of little significance compared to what Tom was planning to do. Nevertheless, he allowed himself a brief moment of contentment over his accomplishment. This project had not been easy and it had taken him and Dumbledore months to bring the spell-controlling technique to its final stage.

The two professors soon started a discussion on the usage of the newly discovered technique and Tom took his time to observe his Head of house.

Slughorn had never been good at hiding his true feelings and Tom could easily tell that the man was jealous. This suggested that Dumbledore still had yet to share the reason behind his newfound interest in Tom with Slughorn – a fact that would certainly work to Tom's advantage.

Throughout their trip in the summer, Dumbledore's intention had become very clear. Somehow, the professor had decided to change from passively observing Tom with suspicion to actively trying to prevent his suspicions from coming true. And under some ridiculous notion, Dumbledore seemed to believe that the best way to accomplish his goal was to change Tom from within. Tom himself wasn't too bothered by Dumbledore's new tactic - he had gained much from it after all.

"So what do you think, my boy?" Slughorn chose that moment to include him in the conversation.

Smiling politely, Tom continued what Dumbledore had left off and explained the rest of the theories to his Head of house. Dumbledore listened on with a satisfied smile; his blue eyes were sparkling with pride.

If Dumbledore thought he was well on his way to turning Tom into his perfect protégé, then he would be in for a huge disappointment. For now, though, Tom would continue to play Dumbledore's game. It was, if nothing else, highly entertaining.

May 6, 1944

"I trust you've heard of what happened yesterday, Mr. Riddle?"

Tom nodded. The news was printed with huge caption on the front page of the Daily Prophet.

"How is Professor Dumbledore?" he asked, knowing that the question was expected from him. Dumbledore had, after all, spent more time with him than with any other students in the past year.

"He is well given what he's gone through," said Dippet, "and he has asked to see you."

"I was about to ask the same, sir," answered Tom smoothly.

Dippet nodded in approval and motioned to the fireplace in his office. "You've been excused from your afternoon classes today. Come back here after lunch, you'll be going to St. Mungo's directly by floo."

"Yes, sir."

Tom slowly pushed open the door to the private ward he had been directed to.

"Professor Dumbledore?"

The auburn-haired wizard sitting on the only bed in the room looked up. "Ah, Tom, come in."

As Tom walked into the room, he was suddenly reminded of Dumbledore's visit to the orphanage years ago, only then their position had been reversed. Dumbledore looked tired, but he didn't seem to be suffering from any serious injuries.

"You look well, sir," he commented, standing at the side of the bed.

"So I've kept telling the healers here," said Dumbledore, "but they insist that I should stay until they are certain I suffer no side-effects from the curses I have been hit with."

That caught Tom's interest. Those who had witnessed it claimed that no other wizarding duel could ever match the one between Dumbledore and Grindelwald.

"It was a close victory," said Dumbledore, apparently having picked up on Tom's curiosity. "I was a shade more skilful than Grindelwald, but there were times when he came close to destroying me in the duel."

"Destroy, sir?" Something told Tom that Dumbledore wasn't talking about being killed.

Dumbledore smiled faintly at the question, but the smile didn't reach his tired eyes. "In a duel, words can be as powerful as any spells, if not more so," he said. "I have known Gellert Grindelwald long before the war started and he knew what frightened me the most."

Grindelwald knew what Dumbledore's worst fear was and had used it against him? Tom carefully stored that piece of information away.

"The Prophet said you insisted that he be imprisoned instead of executed," he ventured.

Dumbledore nodded. "I did."

"Why spare his life, sir?" It was a neutral enough question considering that it was currently as huge a subject of speculation as the actual details of the duel.

For a fleeting moment, Dumbledore – the man who had just defeated the Dark Lord and ended the war – looked conflicted and uncertain. But that moment passed quickly and a determined look entered Dumbledore's eyes.

"Ward the door for me, would you, Tom?" he asked.

Intrigued by the secrecy, Tom pulled out his wand and waved it towards the door, locking it and stopping anyone from listening in.

"Take a seat." Dumbledore nodded at the empty chair next to the bed.

Tom did as he was told, wondering what Dumbledore was about to tell him.

"Gellert Grindelwald and I were good friends," Dumbledore began slowly. "Long ago, we shared a common goal – a goal that I am not

proud of." He closed his eyes briefly, then continued in a quiet voice, "You see, Tom, when I was young, I was unsatisfied with my home life. I thought I was meant for better things than staying at home and taking care of my siblings. I wanted to shine. I wanted glory."

Tom quickly squashed his surprise in favour of taking in everything that Dumbledore was revealing. He listened attentively as Dumbledore talked of his family, of his complete failure as a brother, of his first meeting with Grindelwald, of the plans they had made and of the incident that resulted in the death of his sister.

Tom took in not just Dumbledore's words, but also his tone, his hand movements and the emotions that occasionally crossed his face. He could tell that Dumbledore was struggling to just tell his story from the beginning to the end. And by now, he had spent enough time with the professor to tell that those were genuine confessions – and that was what they were, wasn't it? – instead of made-up stories.

Dumbledore looked physically drained when he finally finished his long recounting. Tom's face remained impassive, but his mind was reeling with all the new information he had just acquired.

"Why are you telling me this?" he asked once he recovered from his shock.

Part of him rejoiced at having learned Dumbledore's weaknesses, but another part of him was filled with disgust. Surely Dumbledore could see that his unnecessary feelings over his sister's death were weakening him and dictating his actions?

"Because I want you to know that I understand how you feel, Tom," said Dumbledore, looking him in the eyes. "I once craved what you are after now. I thought what I did was right and it took the loss of what I cared for the most – what I never paid any attention to until it was too late – to wake me up from that crazy dream." Dumbledore's eyes were filled with regret. "I do not wish the same for you, my boy. You have a bright future ahead of you, everyone can see that, but I fear where your talents and ambition might lead you one day."

Tom knew exactly where they would lead him. Out loud, he said, "I'm afraid I don't understand what you're trying to say, sir."

Dumbledore sighed. "I am aware of what you've been telling your housemates, Tom."

So Dumbledore had indeed been monitoring him; Tom wasn't surprised in the slightest. But if what he had said to those pureblood heirs was all Dumbledore had based his suspicions on, then Tom knew he had nothing to be afraid of.

His goal was nothing like Grindelwald's – and, years ago, Dumbledore's. He did not care about the greater good, nor did he actually believe that the wizarding world would be better off with the self-importance purebloods leading them. No, everything he said and did was for himself – the only one that mattered.

"You don't have to worry about me becoming the next Grindelwald, sir."

"I certainly hope so, Tom. I certainly hope so," Dumbledore whispered. "Because I cannot bear doing this for a second time."

For a moment Dumbledore's calm façade slipped and it was only then that the extent of the injuries he had sustained in the battle became clear. While he looked fine physically, emotionally he was a complete mess. Tom suspected that was also why Dumbledore had been so willing to share his life story with him.

"You won't have to," said Tom reassuringly. "What you fear will never come true. I promise."

Dumbledore gave him a faint smile in response.

For a long while, they sat in complete silence. When Dumbledore spoke up again, it was with a considerably more casual tone than before.

"So, tell me, Tom, how is your study going? You have finished the book I lent you last week, I assume?"

Tom gladly leaped into what soon became a purely academic discussion with his professor, all the while feeling very pleased by how this visit had turned out. Dumbledore had made a grave mistake today and Tom now had all he needed to overcome the one

obstacle that stood in his way. And if Dumbledore was reluctant to fight back when the time came, all the better.

August 2, 1944

Tom stood before the front door of Riddle House, his heart pounding with anticipation. After a whole year of preparation, today had finally arrived.

He unlocked the door with magic and entered the house without making a sound. Once inside, he lifted the disillusionment charm on himself and made his way to the drawing room. According to what he had picked up from the now-unconscious gardener's mind, the three occupants in his house, following a set routine every day, would almost always be found gathering in that room at this hour.

Tom reached his destination in no time. He stopped before the door, then, deliberately, raised his hand and knocked twice.

There was a moment of silence, then a male voice called out, "What is the matter, Frank?"

Tom pulled out his wand and opened the door. On his right was a fireplace and in front of it were three armchairs - all of them were occupied. Sitting nearest to the door was a dark-haired man. He looked up from the book in his hands, looking annoyed.

"Frank, how many times have I told you-" He stopped abruptly, his eyes widened in shock.

"How have you been all these years, father?" said Tom with a cold smile playing on his lips.

The book fell soundlessly onto the floor as the man stood up, staring at Tom in disbelief. "You can't- you can't be-"

By that point the two other occupants in the room had gathered near them, both wearing a similar look of shock on their faces. Tom's attention, however, was only on the man standing before him. He watched as his father's eyes flickered to his wand, then the look of disbelief turned into fear.

"Listen to me," he said urgently, "you don't understand."

"There is no need to speak to him," interrupted the man who Tom knew to be his grandfather. He glared at Tom with a look of utter contempt. "You are no son of anyone in this house, boy, and if you dare claim otherwise or are under a false impression that you can gain anything from this family, then you can –"

The cold smile never left Tom's face. "I'm afraid you are the only one who is under a false impression, grandfather. There is only one thing I wish from this family, and I always get what I want."

Face reddened in anger and indignant, the old man reached out to grab Tom's shoulder. "Why, you-"

"Avada Kedavra!"

Green light shot out from Tom's outstretched wand and hit his grandfather in the chest. The old man was dead before he hit the floor.

Tom's grandmother screamed in horror. "Thomas!"

Swiftly, Tom raised his wand again. "Avada Kedavra!"

The killing curse hit his grandmother before she could reach her husband's side. Her lifeless body fell onto the floor with a terrified look frozen on her face.

Tom stared down at the two dead bodies and an indescribable feeling of pleasure rushed through him. He had felt the same once before when he killed Billy Stubbs' rabbit. Since then, that special feeling had become a comfort to him – a reminder of his own power and a thread that he always held onto whenever those in the orphanage tried to bring him down to their level of mundaneness.

"What – what have you done to them?"

Tom looked up from the corpses to meet the horrified gaze of his father. "Don't worry, father, you'll meet the same fate soon enough."

His father took a few steps backwards, away from him. "You don't understand. I can explain-"

"There will be no need for that," said Tom. The smile vanished from his face as he raised his wand again and aimed it in between his father's eyes. "Legilimens!"

Memories flooded into Tom's mind, telling him the story of his birth.

Love Potions. Forced marriage. The confession of the woman whose weakness had ruined everything. And finally, the abandonment.

Tom's anger rose with each scene he viewed. And when the memory finally reached its end and he found himself back in the drawing room of Riddle House, he knew he couldn't have chosen a better candidate for what he was about to do.

"You are going to kill me, aren't you?" said his father. "That's what you've come to do." It was not a question.

"Someone like you cannot even hope to understand Lord Voldemort's plans," said Tom coldly. "You should be grateful, father, that I'm now including you in one of them."

Before his father could reply, Tom grabbed his diary from his robe pocket with his free hand, opened it, then raised his wand.

"Avada Kedavra!" he shouted for the third time that night.

Everything around Tom faded out of sight as his eyes followed the movement of the curse with utmost concentration. Tightening his grip on his wand, he held his breath and waited.

It seemed to have taken ages before the killing curse finally reached its target. Tom paid his father no mind. With the same technique he had now used many times to control the movement of his spells, he easily found the link that connected the killing curse to his magic. He concentrated on the link, then cast the spell that would start the Ritual.

The result was immediate. The green light of the killing curse spread out, forming a blinding sphere around the body of his now deceased father. At the same time, a surge of power rushed towards Tom and hit him with full force. Tom took in a sharp breath and for a second he could feel something within him give a slight tremble. The surge

of power left behind a trail of glowing white light, solidifying the previously invisible connection between Tom's wand and the glowing magical sphere.

The sacrifice had been accepted. The Ritual had begun.

Without pausing, Tom held up his diary and pressed his wand against its opened pages. Nothing happened at first, then a silvery orb began to form at the tip of his wand – his soul.

Tom watched in fascination as the silvery orb slowly drifted away from the tip of his wand and planted itself onto the pages of his diary. He had expected the process to be painful, but there was nothing except a mild feeling of emptiness that was insignificant compared to his own excitement.

The air was now filled with raw power and the first sign of something going horribly wrong was reflected in the sudden increase in temperature around the room. Too engrossed in the Ritual, Tom paid no mind to his surroundings until, without warning, his wand started to vibrate violently. His eyes widened in shock as he felt the magic around him spiralled out of control. Gritting his teeth, Tom held his wand tight and tried to force his magic back under control. But his attempt was in vain and there was nothing he could do as his magic turned itself back towards him.

The pain came first, followed by an unimaginable heat that threatened to consume his whole body from within. He forced his eyes open and looked up, only to find the magic around his father's dead body swirl back into one and shoot towards him. The deadly green beam hit him in the chest. Blackness engulfed him and all was gone.

A/N: Finally we've reached this part. Yes, I know I haven't really answered any questions you may have about 'Professor Kray' with this chapter, but more explanations will come, I promise...

The next chapter will be in a similar format, then we'll be back to Dumbledore's office in canon world.

Chapter 19: Dumbledore's Choice

September 4, 1944

Pain. There was nothing but pain. He gasped for breath, but his lungs were burning. His limbs seemed to have crumpled together. He couldn't move.

Was he... dead?

It was impossible. It was unacceptable.

He opened his eyes. His vision was blurred and he could only make out the shapes of a dozen tall figures a distance away from him. They were all heading towards a place he couldn't see. None of them paid him any attention.

Another wave of pain hit him and it hurt so much that he screamed out, but only a muffled moan came out from his mouth.

What was happening?

A group of bystanders stopped right in front of him. He couldn't make out their faces, but their revulsion came across very clearly. Some of them were whispering among themselves. Others were openly jeering at him and laughing cruelly at his predicament.

Anger rose within him, but it didn't last long against the never-ending pain and soon disappeared along with the rest of his resolve.

He didn't understand why it hurt so much. He didn't know where the pain came from. All he knew was that he wished nothing more at that moment than for the pain to stop and for the sickening emptiness inside him to be filled.

He could tell that something was missing. He couldn't name what it was, but he wanted it.

He wanted it badly.

Once again he looked up at the apathetic bystanders around him. Somehow, he could tell that whatever he was longing for, they

already had it. If only one of them would reach out, if only one of them would tell him how to quench that unbearable thirst inside him -

But none of them approached him. None of them reached out. All they did was stare down at him in contempt and whisper among themselves. He missed most of what they said except one repeating word.

'Monster...'

The crowd around him slowly dispersed. Once again, he was left alone, abandoned, and unwanted by all. He knew then that there was no escape from this place; no escape from the pain and the helplessness and the unbearable emptiness inside him.

And still the whispered word continued to ring in the air repeatedly.

'Monster...'

Tom woke to the darkness of the Slytherin dormitory. His heart was pounding and his forehead was covered with sweat. His throat was sore – had he been screaming in his dream?

He sat up on his bed, unconsciously rubbing the spot where the rebounded killing curse had hit him. The wound had now closed off and the only sign of it ever happening was the scar on his chest. Such a scar would never fade, but that suited Tom just fine. It was the proof of his surviving the killing curse, of his escaping death when all others had failed.

And one day, he would conquer it.

Even though his first attempt to create a Horcrux had not been successful, he had been close. All he needed to do was to find out what had gone wrong and wait for his next opportunity.

He had had plenty of time to go over the confusing incident that had happened a month ago, and he had come to only one possible conclusion as to why he had survived. He had been in the process of transferring half of his soul into his diary when he lost control of his magic. When the killing curse hit him, the piece of soul inside his body had been destroyed at once, but the other half had remained

intact. For a moment, the lone piece of soul had lingered halfway between his body and his diary. Then, as per its nature, the soul fragment had attached itself to the nearest body – its original host. Tom had felt a strong force pulling him out of the maimed body he had been forced to exist in and the next second he had found himself back in the Riddle House, terrified and shaken to the core because for a moment, he had been truly dead.

But he had lived in the end, and that was all that mattered. The thought of him only having half of his soul now did bother him a little, but he contributed that feeling to his frustration at failing to make a Horcrux and was certain that it would simply fade in time. After all, even if all that remained was a tiny portion of his soul, his magical power would still remain as strong as ever. He had little reason to be bothered by his loss.

No, only one thing ever bothered him - the fact that he had the same mortal flaw as those worthless creatures; that he could die just as easily as any one of them despite the power he held. That was why he knew that guaranteeing his immortality had to come before all of his other plans. It became even more urgent now that he had seen what death was like.

'Monster...' a voice in his mind whispered, carrying with it the unbearable emptiness that made him feel weak and powerless.

With a snarl, Tom forcefully pushed away all thoughts concerning the events in the Riddle House and angrily grabbed the book he had left on the bedside table before he fell asleep. He opened *The History of Magical Theory* with an air of desperation and forced himself to focus on the words. It was not the most interesting book in the world, but the dull facts never failed to distract him from his nightmare and to chase away – if only temporarily - the shadow of doubt that was constantly lurking at the back of his mind, threatening to destroy the very foundation of his belief.

September 18, 1944

Tom walked along the gloomy corridor, lost in his thoughts. He could hardly see where he was going in the darkness, but he had walked the path to the library too many times before that he could easily find his way blindfolded.

Once again, he had woken up in the middle of the night in cold sweat, unable to go back to sleep. It was only the first time in a whole week, meaning that his mind was finally recovering from the experience, though not as quickly as he would have liked. He had been unable to do anything useful in the past few weeks because his mind refused to rest at night, resulting in his constant exhaustion.

That was why he couldn't waste any more time now. He needed to find out why his spells had failed the day he killed his father. There wasn't much chance in finding his answer in Hogwarts' library, but he was hoping to find some clues that might help him start his search.

He was close to reaching the library when a voice – an all too familiar voice – called out to him in the dark.

"Tom?"

Tom shut his eyes reflexively as a bright light flickered to life some distance ahead of him. He blinked a few times before looking up again, only to find himself face to face with the last person he wanted to see right now. He cursed his luck - Albus Dumbledore was the only one in this school who could see through his disillusionment charm.

"Planning to visit the library, Tom?" asked Dumbledore.

Tom's eyes flickered to the books Dumbledore was carrying with him. "I wanted to check out a reference mentioned in the book I'm reading," he said smoothly, "but I didn't want to wait until tomorrow, so I –"

"Decided to come visit the library even though it's hours after curfew," finished Dumbledore.

"I'm sorry, sir," said Tom, shifting his feet to make himself look uncomfortable.

"Seeing as it is quite obvious where I've just been," Dumbledore winked as he motioned to the stack of books in his hand, "I would say you don't have to worry about getting into trouble for your curiosity this time."

Tom could tell from Dumbledore's tone that this was far from over. His dread was confirmed when Dumbledore spoke up again.

"I must say, however, that I am worried about you, Tom."

"Worried, sir?"

Dumbledore's face turned serious. "Perhaps we should move this conversation to my office?"

Without waiting for a reply, Dumbledore extinguished the light at the tip of his wand and gestured for Tom to follow. Left with no choice, Tom wordlessly followed Dumbledore, all the while preparing himself for whatever the coming conversation might entail.

All too soon, they arrived at the office that Tom was by now very familiar with. He had spent countless hours in this room during his sixth year, assisting Dumbledore in his research work. It had been months since he had last been to Dumbledore's office, however. His detentions had ended before the summer, so he was no longer obliged to assist Dumbledore in his projects.

Tom had half-expected Dumbledore to find a way to continue those little sessions with him once school had resumed, but the professor had kept his distance, seemingly content to let things revert to the way they used to be before the Chamber of Secrets incident... until now. Tom wondered how much of this had to do with the murders he had committed in the summer.

"Take a seat, Tom."

Tom sat in front of Dumbledore's desk and watched with growing wariness as Dumbledore conjured another chair right next to him instead of taking his usual seat behind the desk. Turning his own chair around so that he was almost facing Dumbledore, Tom waited for the first question to come.

For once, Dumbledore cut right to the point. "You have not been yourself lately, Tom," he said. "You're tired all the time and you're not eating your meals. Has anything happened?"

So Dumbledore was checking if he was eating properly now?

"I am merely busy preparing for my NEWTs, sir," answered Tom.

Dumbledore shook his head. "We both know that it is not true. Your tiredness isn't one that is caused by overworking." He closed his eyes briefly as if preparing himself for the coming conversation, then he asked, "Does any of this has to do with the deaths of your father and grandparents?"

Clearly, this was the whole point of this meeting. Tom was not at all surprised; he had fully expected Dumbledore to start his own investigation on the murders. But while it was logical for Dumbledore to suspect him, Tom was certain that he had left no clues behind.

"I knew they might have been alive, but I never wanted to meet them. They obviously didn't want to meet me." Tom lowered his gaze, playing the part of an orphan who had been abandoned since birth. "Then I heard of their murders and I... I suppose it was more of a shock than I expected it to be."

There was a moment of silence, then Tom felt Dumbledore's hand on his shoulder. Reluctantly, he looked up to meet Dumbledore's eyes. The mask of gentleness failed to conceal the intensity of his gaze.

"Is that the truth, Tom?"

Tom kept his face blank. "What are you trying to say, sir?"

Dumbledore sighed. "It was you, wasn't it?" he said. "You killed your own father and grandparents."

It seemed Dumbledore had finally decided to drop his pretence and voice his suspicion, not that Tom was going to admit to anything.

"You think I'm the one who killed them?" he said in disbelief. "The murderer has been found, sir. Morfin Gaunt has admitted to killing all three of them."

"Memories can be forged, Tom, and you are certainly skilled enough to do so without being detected," countered Dumbledore without pausing.

"But that doesn't mean anything," retorted Tom, starting to feel a little annoyed. Dumbledore had obviously spent a lot of time trying to piece together a possible scenario that fit his suspicion. "Why do you always automatically suspect me of— "

"No, Tom, I have tried to convince myself that things are just as they seem, that your uncle has indeed killed all three occupants in the Riddle House and that you have nothing to do with the murders at all," said Dumbledore. "But I could not shake off my doubt. I needed to know for sure. So three days ago, I travelled to Little Hangleton and paid the Riddle House a visit. I found traces of magic all over the drawing room, Tom, traces of your magic."

Tom stiffened. In all honesty, he had just learned that magic could leave traces behind less than a week ago from one of his random readings. Still, he should have realized sooner that his accident would undoubtedly have left traces of his magic behind. Obviously, Dumbledore was one of the few who actually knew how to interpret those traces.

"Ordinary magic would not leave behind traces like the ones I have found, not even the killing curse. So I ask you now," Dumbledore looked as though he was afraid to find out the answer, "what have you done, Tom? What have you done to yourself?"

A sudden fear seized Tom as he stared into the pair of intense blue eyes. It was one thing to be accused of murder – he had expected that – but Dumbledore must not know, must not even suspect, what other piece of magic he had tried to perform that day.

"Nothing," he replied with narrowed eyes, unconsciously letting his anger wash away his fear. "It's all your assumption, sir. Even if there's magic in that house, what can you prove? The murderer has confessed, the Ministry would not waste their time going over the case again."

"Yes, that is what you're counting on, isn't it?" said Dumbledore calmly. "The war has just ended and the muggle world is in chaos. The Ministry would not waste their resource on the murder of three muggles. Yes, this is, I'm afraid, the sad truth of our world today, but that does not erase what you have done."

"I have done nothing." Tom spat. "Yes, I might have been to that house after the murder, but it's only because I want to find out more about my family, is that so wrong? Why are you so determined to prove that I'm a murderer? I've changed since the Chamber of Secrets incident. You knew that."

Dumbledore looked taken back and Tom smirked inwardly when he saw the doubt in the professor's eyes. But his triumph didn't last long. Dumbledore's doubt was soon replaced by grim determination.

"I want to believe that you have indeed changed, Tom, and for a time I have been so certain that you have," said Dumbledore, looking years older all of a sudden. "But I was wrong. Once again, I have let my feelings deceive me from seeing the truth. And this time, my mistake has cost three lives."

Anger rose within Tom when he found that Dumbledore was not at all reacting the way he expected him to. "If you're so sure that I am the one who killed them, then prove it! Or are you trying to threaten me with Veritaserum again? Because you're not going to find anything."

Dumbledore sighed. "I'm not forcing you to confess to anything, Tom, all I want is to help you."

"The same way you helped Grindelwald?" said Tom, bringing up the Dark Lord deliberately. "By locking him up instead of killing him?"

Anger crossed Dumbledore's face at the cruel reminder, but it faded as quickly as it appeared. Dumbledore shook his head. "Why are you so determined to drive me away? I'm not trying to get you sent to prison, Tom, even though you should be."

Tom was on his feet before he realized what he was doing. "Then what do you want?" he grounded out. "What are you trying to do?"

"I've already told you, Tom, I want to help you," said Dumbledore.

Tom snarled. "I don't need help,"

"Look at yourself, Tom," said Dumbledore, his blue eyes hardened. "Why are you so angry?"

Tom stilled, realizing that Dumbledore was right. He had always been careful in controlling his emotions, especially around the professors. He wasn't even sure when his usual mask had slipped.

"Whatever happened in the summer, it has affected you greatly," Dumbledore continued. "You do need help, my boy. In fact, you are desperate for it."

That last sentence once again ignited Tom's anger. Part of him was trying desperately to force his anger back behind his mask; another part of him simply didn't care.

"Don't pretend that you know me, Dumbledore," he hissed. "You have no idea who I am."

Tom stopped himself abruptly, realizing that he had talked too much. What was wrong with him? He normally had better control than that. Was it a side effect of having lost half a soul?

"How about a deal then, Tom?"

Concealing his alarm, Tom turned his attention back to Dumbledore.

"A deal?"

Dumbledore stood up so that they were now standing face to face. The doubt that crossed the professor's eyes did not escape Tom's notice.

"Tomorrow night, right after dinner, you will come to my room, and we will talk again," said Dumbledore slowly and clearly. "And just for this one night, you will put aside your mask and show me who you really are. No lies, no deceptions and no pretence. And in return – "

At that, Dumbledore hesitated. But as far as Tom was concerned, Dumbledore was merely wasting his time. There was no way he would ever agree to this so-called deal, no matter what Dumbledore was willing to offer.

When Dumbledore spoke up again, it was with a significantly greater resolve than before. "In return," he repeated with a grave voice, "you can have the guarantee that you will never have to face me on the

other side of a battlefield, should you one day find yourself in one, which I hope not."

Tom froze. Did Dumbledore mean –

"Yes, Tom, all I want is your complete honesty for one night. In return, if you are to claim yourself as a Dark Lord and declare war against the general population of this world and the muggle world, I promise to stay out of your way – or, should I say, Lord Voldemort's way– completely. I will not fight you, nor will I aid anyone in fighting you."

The tension in the room was suffocating. It was the first time Dumbledore had spelled out his 'suspicions' so clearly and Tom was in a complete shock over what he had just heard.

"And how are we going to seal this deal?" he asked.

"You must understand, Tom, that it is perhaps the greatest insult for a teacher like myself to have to win over a student's trust with a binding oath," said Dumbledore with a sad smile. "As it is, I don't think you'd accept anything less than an Unbreakable Vow, am I correct?"

Tom stared at Dumbledore in disbelief. "Why?" was all he managed to say.

Dumbledore raised an eyebrow. "I believe I have already answered that question twice. Believe it or not, Tom, I want to help you."

No, Tom did not believe it. What kind of deal was this? Dumbledore was turning his back on the world he had just protected from Grindelwald several months ago just to – Tom wasn't even sure what Dumbledore thought he could gain with this deal.

"Now, Tom, you have to make your decision quickly," said Dumbledore. "I think it is safe to say that this is the only time I'd ever propose such an outrageously selfish deal."

Selfish? The memory of his visiting Dumbledore in the hospital resurfaced in Tom's mind.

"Because I cannot bear doing this for a second time."

Was that it? Dumbledore was trying to use this deal as an excuse to escape –

No, Tom realized, this was not a mean to escape responsibility. This was a gamble. Somehow, Dumbledore still naively believed that Tom could be changed and he was offering Tom the one thing he would not be able to refuse in exchange for the truth – or, as Dumbledore put it, Tom's 'trust'.

"Who will be the binder?" he asked guardedly.

"Since a third person isn't present, we will bind the oath with both of our magic," said Dumbledore, stretching out his hand.

Normally this deal was unthinkable, but the promise of eliminating Dumbledore – the one person who he knew would lead the force that opposed him – as an enemy was too tempting.

"You will keep what you learn about me to yourself?" he asked for confirmation.

Dumbledore nodded. "I will tell no one unless you wish me to."

Tom stared at Dumbledore's outstretched hand. His mind was shouting in protest over the idea of giving Dumbledore complete power over him, even only for a short while.

But he would have to endure. However he looked at this deal, he would be the one in advantage. Knowing Dumbledore, he knew he would most likely end up having to tell the professor everything. But because of the deal, Dumbledore would not be able to take any action against him. Tom had nothing to lose.

Slowly, he reached out and clasped Dumbledore's hand. "Let us bind this deal then, professor."

A/N: I know I've mentioned that this chapter would conclude Tom's story, but it seems we have one more to go...

Chapter 20: Nature or Nurture

September 19, 1944

Dumbledore's private quarters were embarrassingly disorganized. Gadgets of different sizes and shapes were sticking out everywhere and books were arranged in a completely disorderly fashion on the bookshelves. No one would ever have guessed that the messy room actually belonged to one of the most powerful wizards in the world.

Sitting on a couch that was too soft for his taste, Tom continued to survey his surroundings with guarded eyes. There was no portrait on the walls and Dumbledore's phoenix was nowhere in sight. Just minutes ago, Dumbledore had put up an elaborate show of warding the room in front of him. As sceptical as he was, Tom had to admit that it was impossible for anyone to spy in on their coming conversation.

Tom paused in his musing when the fire in the fireplace turned green and Dumbledore stepped out, holding two steaming cups in his hands. He walked over to Tom and set down the cups on the small table in front of him.

"Hot chocolate, sir?"

Dumbledore smiled. "I doubt lemon drops would be enough for this conversation, don't you agree, Tom?" he said, taking the seat opposite from him.

Tom's first thought was that the drink might have been laced with a potion, then he realised that it would not be necessary since he was currently bound by magic stronger than any truth serum. Unlike Veritaserum, which forced the truth out of its victim brutally and could be resisted in a way not unlike how one resisted the Imperius Curse, the Unbreakable Vow was completely foolproof. It could not force Tom to tell the truth in any way, but it made sure that lying was not an option. A single lie and he would be killed instantly.

Sitting in silence, Tom waited for Dumbledore's inevitable questions. The threat of death made him feel vulnerable, especially since he knew Dumbledore would not stop until he knew everything.

Dumbledore took a sip from his own cup, then set it down and eyed Tom calmly. "Why don't we begin with who actually killed your father and grandparents, Tom?"

As if Dumbledore didn't already know the answer.

"I killed them," said Tom shortly.

A look of pain crossed Dumbledore's face. "Why?"

Why? No reason was needed for Tom to kill that man. "He deserved to die."

Dumbledore frowned. "And why did he deserve to die, Tom?" he pressed. "Because he abandoned you and left you alone when he should have cared for you?"

Tom opened his mouth to deny the claim, but he stopped himself in the last second. Was that the truth? With the consequence of lying weighting heavily on him, Tom found himself searching inwardly for the answer.

"Yes," he admitted finally.

"And your grandparents?" prompted Dumbledore.

To that, Tom easily answered, "They were in the way."

"In the way?"

Tom was starting to get impatient. Was Dumbledore going to question him over every small detail?

"I was planning to only kill my father," he said, "but they happened to be in the same room, so I killed them all."

A fleeting look of revulsion crossed Dumbledore's face either because of what Tom had said or the dismissive tone in which he had described the murders.

"You don't feel sorry at all, do you, Tom?" he asked quietly.

Tom forced back the instinctive impulse to lie. "No, I don't."

Dumbledore looked about to say more on the subject, but then he let out a defeated sigh and started a new line of questioning. "What else have you done in the Riddle House aside from... the murders?"

Tom had known that there was no escaping from this question once he agreed to Dumbledore's deal. Still, despite knowing that Dumbledore was bounded by the Unbreakable Vow to keep what he learned to himself, it took him great effort to voluntarily share this particular secret.

"I wanted to make a Horcrux."

Dumbledore's horrified look left no doubt in Tom's mind that the professor knew what a Horcrux was. He was looking at Tom as though he was only seeing him plainly for the first time and had just realized what kind of person he had been trying to help.

Tom gritted his teeth. He hated the way Dumbledore was looking at him now.

"I couldn't make one," he said, offering information without prompting for the first time. "My spells backfired in the middle of the Ritual."

Dumbledore's eyes widened once the implication of what Tom had said sunk in. Tom searched Dumbledore's face and was oddly pleased when he found genuine concern lurking just beneath the professor's unusually grim demeanour.

"The killing curse. It was the first spell of that Ritual, wasn't it?" said Dumbledore.

Tom nodded. A Ritual was a magical ceremony that combined the power of several spells. In the process of creating a Horcrux, the first spell was the one that was used in the murder. That spell started the Ritual and provided the power that was needed to drive the other two spells.

"The spells in a Ritual are chained together by magic," said Dumbledore slowly. "When one of the spells backfired, so would the others, and backfired spells are impossible to dodge." He paused, looking deeply troubled. "What happened, Tom?"

Tom hesitated before answering carefully, "I was hit by the backfired killing curse, but I had already completed half of the Ritual when it happened, so I survived."

Dumbledore frowned then he paled upon realizing what must have happened. "Your soul," he said quietly. "You lost half of your soul."

Tom nodded. "That is the only possible explanation."

He met Dumbledore's eyes and found in them a look that he knew very well. He had seen that look often enough in the orphanage matron's and the other children's eyes, but never from Dumbledore or from anyone else in the wizarding world – the world that he belonged to.

Something cold stirred inside him and the words were out before Tom could stop them, "You think I'm a monster."

That simple sentence seemed to have snapped Dumbledore out of his stupor. He stared at Tom in surprise. "What did you say?"

"I saw it in your eyes, professor," said Tom coldly. "You're disgusted by me. You think I'm a cold-blooded monster just like those worthless muggles all think I am."

Dumbledore still looked too shock to respond, so Tom continued, a cruel smile playing on his lips. "I warned you, didn't I? You wouldn't like what you find about me," he said. "Such a shame, because there is no backing out from our deal by now."

"And whoever said I want to back out?" Dumbledore finally spoke up. "I would not lie to you, Tom, what you have done, indeed, disgusts me. But I do not, not even for a second, believe that you are a monster or that you are beyond help."

"What if I am?" said Tom challengingly. "You still don't understand, do you? I'm not who you think I am. I'm not like everyone else."

Dumbledore let out a shaky breath, apparently trying to compose himself. "Then why don't you tell me who you are, Tom? I can't use what you tell me against you, so there's no reason to be afraid," he

said gently. "Take this as an opportunity, let at least one person in this world get to know you."

Tom almost laughed. Dumbledore was trying to get him to reveal his deepest secrets and he was calling it an opportunity? Nevertheless, Tom found himself beginning to talk about the one thing that had been bothering him ever since he came back from that hell.

"You asked me why I killed," he said. "The truth is that the reason wasn't important because their lives didn't matter to me. No one's life ever matters to me."

Dumbledore frowned. "How about your housemates? Aren't they your friends?"

"I couldn't lie, sir," Tom reminded him. "They could all die and I wouldn't be able to feel anything."

Dumbledore looked taken back, then a profound sadness filled his face. "Wouldn't be able to feel anything, you say?" he whispered with a slight tremor in his voice.

Once again, Tom asked himself why he was confiding in Dumbledore of all people. It was completely unnecessary and there was nothing he could gain from it. And yet-

"You do need help, my boy. In fact, you are desperate for it."

Dumbledore's words from the night before rang in Tom's mind, but he pushed them away quickly. He didn't need help, and he certainly didn't want Dumbledore to mess with his life.

No, he was telling Dumbledore his secrets for an entirely different reason - he wanted that unbearable emptiness that had been growing inside him for the past few weeks to go away. And as much as he hated to admit it, he had come to realize that he would not be able to accomplish that alone.

An opportunity, Dumbledore had said. Perhaps there was some truth in those words after all.

"The matron in the orphanage had wanted me to be looked at since I was eight," he said. "She wanted to send me away. She knew that I was different, and it wasn't just because of my magic."

He stared down at this hand and recalled the many times he had watched Billy Stubbs playing with the other children from afar, all the while imagining what it would be like to straggle the boy's rabbit. Mrs. Cole had at one time thought that he longed to join the children's group, but she had realized her mistake soon enough.

"All those feelings that seem to come naturally for everyone never come to me in the same way. Everything that seems so valuable to them – to you - never means anything to me." He paused for a long while, then he whispered, "I thought it made me strong. I thought all those feelings would only hinder me and I was glad I was not weak like everyone else. But I- "

He stopped then, unable to continue, because he knew if he was to acknowledge that lingering doubt in his mind, all that he had come to know and believe would never be the same again.

"You feel that something important is missing, don't you, Tom? And you don't understand what that is."

Tom looked up sharply when Dumbledore suddenly spoke up. He felt naked under Dumbledore's gaze now that the professor had heard of what he had never admitted to anyone, not even to himself. The moment of vulnerability quickly ignited his anger.

"Spare me your lecture, Dumbledore," he snarled. "I know what you want to say. You want to tell me that love could solve everything, don't you? You're wrong!"

Dumbledore did not back down. "Listen to me, Tom. No one can change how you feel unless you wish to be changed. And no one can help you unless you allow yourself to be helped." Then a faint smile spread across his face. "But you must forgive the stubbornness of an old professor, my boy, because I intend to do both anyway."

Tom was in no mood for light jokes. "Why?" he demanded. "Why are you doing this? Why make this deal in the first place?"

Dumbledore looked him in the eyes and answered, "Because, Tom, I see before me now a young man who is about to set himself on a path that is one day going to ruin him, and I find myself in a position that may be able to put a stop to it before it is too late. And more importantly, I have come to care greatly for this young man, who I enjoy sharing my knowledge with and who never ceases to amaze me with his talent, and I cannot bear seeing him destroy his own life when I know I may be able to help him."

Tom could tell that Dumbledore was completely sincere. "You're a fool to even think that," he said.

"A fool I am, Tom," said Dumbledore softly as tears ran down his face, "for failing you so horribly without even realizing it until now."

Tom stared at Dumbledore in surprise at the unexpected admission. Inwardly he was feeling strangely pleased. His lips curled up in a slight smirk as he replied, "Exactly what I said; a fool."

September 20, 1944

Walking down the familiar corridor with a book in his hand, Tom mused over the peculiar situation he currently found himself in. At the centre of that situation, unsurprisingly, stood the unmoving figure of Albus Dumbledore, whose presence had become somewhat a constant in Tom's life in the past one and a half year.

Admittedly, Tom had never liked Dumbledore, and he was certain that the feeling had been mutual. He remembered that in his first year, he had tried to get on the professor's good side, but nothing seemed to have been able to change Dumbledore's impression of him. The fact that Tom was always at the top of his class and the personal favourite of many staff members had only served to further convince Dumbledore that he was not who he appeared to be.

Ironically, it was only after his suspicion had been confirmed that Dumbledore began to treat Tom differently. In the months that followed the Chamber of Secrets incident, Tom had managed to accomplish what he had been unable to do for years without even meaning to – he had made Dumbledore like him. But unlike the other professors, Dumbledore was well aware what Tom intended to do once he graduated. So instead of inviting him to parties like Slughorn always did, Dumbledore had tried to 'save' him.

As time went by, Tom had slowly begun to enjoy spending time with Dumbledore. It was also Dumbledore who had given him the best summer he have ever had. But as much fun as he had had, he had always remained on guard, never allowing himself to forget the fact that Dumbledore would one day become his greatest enemy.

But then things had changed again. Dumbledore had voluntarily rendered himself harmless. All of a sudden, Tom found that he no longer had any reason to be cautious around Dumbledore, not only because the Unbreakable Vow made it impossible for Dumbledore to do anything against him, but also because there simply wasn't anything that needed hiding anymore. Dumbledore could pry all he wanted into Tom's life and he wouldn't be able to find anything that he didn't already know.

It was a peculiar situation indeed, and Tom still wasn't sure what to make of it. That uncertainty was the reason that he now found himself standing in front of Dumbledore's office. There were two ways this could turn out, and it all depended on Dumbledore's reaction.

As usual, the door to the office swung open before he could knock, followed by Dumbledore's voice, "Come in, Tom."

Stepping into the office, Tom glanced at Dumbledore, who was sitting behind his desk as always, and he was not at all surprised to find the professor's eyes twinkling madly.

He took his time to close the door, then turned around and walked over to Dumbledore's desk. Wordlessly, he opened the book in his hand and pushed it across the desk.

"What do you think of this, sir?" he asked politely in a respectful tone that students normally talked to their teachers. His eyes, however, spoke of a whole different story.

The unspoken message in his sharp gaze was clear. He had no intention to continue their conversation last night, nor did he want to discuss his chosen future. If Dumbledore could not accept that, then Tom could easily find other ways to occupy his time.

But Dumbledore merely smiled, albeit a little sadly, then picked up Tom's book and scanned the page with genuine curiosity.

"What have you come up with this time, my boy?"

My boy, spoken casually as though Dumbledore hadn't already found out just what kind of person he was talking to. What a predictable fool.

Satisfied with Dumbledore's response, Tom sat down on his accustomed seat in front of the desk and eagerly explained his findings. This was what he had missed and he was glad that Dumbledore, determined as he was to make a difference, was able to see and accept that he had lost any power he had over Tom the moment they sealed their deal.

June 7, 1945

Since it was a commonly accepted fact that it was impossible to control spells, it was only to be expected that a finding that proved the contrary would shock the world. And yet, it had never occurred to Tom that the publication he and Dumbledore had put together could possibly cause such a huge impact in the wizarding world. In fact, he had only thought of the project as a way to discover more about his own magic and it had never crossed his mind that his work would be seen by the world as a 'contribution'. As it was, it had come as a surprise when Dumbledore told him that the Daily Prophet wanted to do an interview with the two of them.

"I usually turn down these invitations, but I have to agree with Professor Slughorn that it would be a good experience for you," Dumbledore had said, not looking at all happy about the idea. "In any case, Tom, do try to enjoy yourself."

The interview took place in the familiar setting of Dumbledore's office. Like any good teacher, Dumbledore seemed content to remain silent and let Tom claim all the glory. But even though the reporter, Mr. Cuffe, looked suitably impressed when Tom recounted some of the details of their work, it was plain to see that he had already decided that everything was Dumbledore's accomplishment and Dumbledore's alone. After all, how could an orphan like Tom, who had been serving his punishment for letting loose a Basilisk in the school, ever match up to Albus Dumbledore, the man who had

defeated the Dark Lord Grindelwald? Besides, that was what the readers would like to hear – yet another accomplishment by their hero.

Annoyance rose within Tom, but he brushed the feeling aside easily. It did not matter. He was well aware of what he was capable of and he had no doubt that the world would one day come to realize the extent of his ability, one way or another.

Tom glanced at Dumbledore when there was a brief pause in the conversation. Twinkling blue eyes met his gaze and the knowing look in them told Tom that Dumbledore knew exactly what had been going through his mind. Tom gave his professor a slight smirk in response, indicating that Dumbledore's irritation over the reporter's open admiration had not gone unnoticed.

A good experience indeed.

By the end of the interview, Cuffe looked satisfied with the information he had collected and Dumbledore looked as though he was about to reach his limit. Of course, the fact that Cuffe seemed to think it was a good idea to keep bringing up Grindelwald in front of Dumbledore only made matters worse.

Completely oblivious to the danger lurking behind the cheerful twinkles, the reporter kept bubbling even when the three of them made their way to the office door. He shook hand with Dumbledore, thanking him for his time, then extended his hand to Tom.

"Learn well from Professor Dumbledore, Tom, I'm sure we can expect great things from you in the future," he said.

Wearing a polite smile, Tom shook the reporter's hand. "Thank you, Mr. Cuffe. I won't disappoint."

After a few more needless exchanges, Dumbledore finally managed to send the reporter out of the office. The fact that Dumbledore had not even offered to accompany Cuffe to the school gate was a good indication of the professor's mood. The door closed behind the reporter with a welcoming click, followed by a relived sigh from Dumbledore.

"That went well," he muttered.

Tom surprised himself by letting out a short laugh, amusement dancing in his eyes. Dumbledore started at the sound of laughter, then the twinkles in his eyes increased tenfold and his previous irritation vanished without a trace.

"Laughing at a professor's expense, Mr. Riddle?" he said.

With a smile still on his face, Tom said, "I never managed to get you this irritated even when I tried, sir, and that idiotic reporter wasn't even trying."

Dumbledore chuckled. "Ah, but that is to be expected, Tom," he said. "Do you know why?"

Tom met Dumbledore's eyes and a mutual understanding passed between them.

Yes, Tom did know. He had gotten to know Dumbledore very well in the past two years.

Dumbledore never wanted the glory and the admiration that he now had. Even though he had craved for them once, they were meaningless to him now that everyone he had ever cared for had left him.

But no one knew that. No one was aware of just how much Albus Dumbledore hated the fame he had gotten because of his defeating the Dark Lord Grindelwald. No one knew that Dumbledore was willing to give up his immense power in exchange for a chance to redeem himself from his past mistakes. And no one knew just how completely alone he was even though he had more friends and admirers than he could count.

No one knew, except Tom, because Dumbledore had told him all about his past, because Dumbledore had willingly rendered himself powerless so that Tom would be able to trust him, because Dumbledore always seemed the happiest whenever Tom came to his office after classes even though they both knew that none of that was ever going to last.

The school year was coming to an end and a choice had to be made very soon.

"I should leave," he heard himself saying.

But Dumbledore wouldn't let him. He stood facing Tom with his back to the door and placed his hands on Tom's shoulders.

"Remember, Tom, there are things in this world that power cannot give you. Those precious little things – things that you have once told me you did not understand, and I do hope I have changed that a little in the past few months – are what make us strong and what, in the end, give meaning to our limited time in this world." He smiled. "Whatever you do in the future is your choice and yours alone, and I fear there's little more I can do at this point to change your decision. I can only hope that, when the time comes for you to choose, what I have just said will be able to give you something to consider." He let his hands stay on Tom's shoulders for a while longer before releasing him. "Now, off you go, my boy. Or would you like a game of chess?"

Tom blinked at the sudden change of subject, then he replied, "Perhaps tomorrow, sir, I was hoping to finish Professor Merrythought's essay today."

When he finally left Dumbledore's office minutes later and made his way back to the Slytherin common room, Tom's thoughts kept returning to what Dumbledore had just said. And it was only then that it occurred to him that he had been thinking of his future as a decision between two possible choices for a while now. When had that happened? For a long time he had walked that single inevitable path, but unbeknownst to him, a second path had appeared. For the first time ever, he found himself standing at a crossroad, both directions had their merits and both, he understood now, required a sacrifice that he was unwilling to make.

June 18, 1945

"Want some before you go, Tom?" Rosier slurred.

Tom pushed the offered glass of whisky back to the obviously drunk seventh year and glanced coldly at the rest of the partying Slytherins.

"Watch him," he said. Without waiting for a reply, he strode out of the common room and let the uncharacteristically noisy seventh

years enjoy their last night at Hogwarts. None of them questioned where he was going – they wouldn't dare – and none of them suspected that the future they had envisioned was no longer happening.

Tom put a disillusionment charm on himself and walked the familiar path out of the dungeons. He walked slowly, wondering if he would ever be back in the castle after his graduation day tomorrow.

Not having a specific destination in mind, he stopped once he reached the Entrance Hall and contemplated where he should go. His thoughts drifted to Dumbledore; he was certain that the professor was still wide-awake even though it was well past midnight - Tom still had yet to give him an answer after all. Of course, Tom was not about to knock on his professor's private quar-

Tom's head snapped up when he felt a presence touching his mental shield. He quickly strengthened his Occlumency, his eyes scanning the area for the person who tried to invade his mind.

But the soft mental touch came again and this time Tom could tell that the presence was not trying to get into his mind, but to convey a message.

Hogwarts.

Tom's eyes widened in wonderment at the realization. The presence he felt was Hogwarts, or rather, the many layers of ancient magic weaving around the castle. And Hogwarts was beckoning him forward.

Cautiously, Tom followed the subtle push of the magic around him and soon found himself heading towards the Astronomy Tower, a part of the castle that he seldom ventured into. He climbed to the top of the tower, then stopped in his track when it became clear just why Hogwarts had brought him to this spot.

Dumbledore was there, standing near the edge of the tower and facing Hogwarts' grounds. Tom hesitated, then waved his wand and conjured a privacy ward around them.

Dumbledore's head lifted up, apparently having sensed Tom's magic. He turned around and smiled when he saw Tom.

"What brings you here, my boy?"

Tom cancelled the disillusionment charm on himself and slowly walked over to where Dumbledore was standing.

"Hogwarts," he answered shortly.

A flicker of surprise crossed Dumbledore's face, then understanding dawned on him. "Ah, of course. It was said that the founders were able to oversee the whole school with the help of the wards around the castle. I should have expected you to be able to do the same."

Tom had heard about the living wards around the school before, but never once had been able to feel it the way he had tonight. Why was that?

The obvious answer came to him quickly. The wards existed to protect the castle and its inhabitants, so it was safe to assume that they would only respond to those who meant no harm to the school. Only now had Tom passed their test.

That fact should have pleased Tom, but it didn't.

Dumbledore chose that moment to break the silence that had drawn on between them. "Professor Slughorn is concerned. He said you have turned down all of your job offers – and I must say it was an impressive list of offers you had, Tom."

Tom glanced at Dumbledore, hearing the unspoken question very clearly.

"You don't have to worry about my future, sir," he said. He had said the same to Slughorn just the day before, but that same statement had an entirely different meaning when said to Dumbledore.

Dumbledore searched his face carefully, then he closed his eyes and let out a long breath, looking as though a heavy weight had been lifted off his shoulder.

"You mean it," he said, looking back at Tom. His eyes were shining brightly with relief and a kind of happiness that Tom had never seen before. "May I ask what changed?"

What changed? Tom thought over his decision, then admitted, "Nothing. Nothing changed."

For a long time he had believed he was stronger than those around him because the feelings that hindered them and made them weak had always been absent in him. But what he had experienced when he was hit by the killing curse clearly pointed to the contrary.

Night after night for the past year, he had dreamt of what he had seen that day and had woken up with the same feeling of emptiness inside him. The nightmare had slowly become less frequent, but it never went away as Tom had initially believed it would. And all the while, the doubt in his mind continued to grow.

But he had refused to acknowledge that doubt. He had ignored it and made up different explanations so as to convince himself that what he had always believed still held true.

Then all of a sudden, he had found another path in front of him – a path that Dumbledore had wanted him to take, a path that would be able to remedy the problem he had been trying to ignore.

In the end, it had been an easy decision. Nothing had changed. All along, he had wanted to be strong. Stronger than the muggles in the orphanage; stronger than anyone. And once he finally allowed himself to acknowledge what he had known for months, the choice had become very clear. If one path would only lead him to the opposite end of his goal, then he had no choice but to pick the other.

"I won't be weak," he said. "I won't be that helpless, disgusting creature." He looked up and met Dumbledore's surprised gaze. "I don't feel sorry for what I've done, I don't think I ever will. But I promise you I will never kill again. I promise you I will never allow myself to become a monster."

That was the best he could give, and if Dumbledore couldn't accept that-

Dumbledore smiled faintly, then placed a hand on his shoulder. "And that is all I ask," he said.

Tom looked away and turned towards the castle grounds. He wondered if Dumbledore really had any idea what he had asked.

A life of lie, of constantly denying what he wanted and becoming someone else entirely. He could change his fate, he could avoid walking straight towards that unacceptable end, but it would not be an easy road.

A gentle squeeze on his shoulder made him look up. He stared at Dumbledore, then realized that perhaps the professor did understand. After all, hadn't Dumbledore been living a life that was burdened by guilt and responsibility? A life, like Tom's now had become, that he could hardly call his own?

Perhaps things would change for the better, perhaps things would not. Either way, the path had been chosen and Tom would stay on that path even if he had to fight every step of the way.

After all, Tom Riddle was, above all else, confident in his ability to get what he wanted.

A/N: Finally, the last part of Tom's story. This chapter is definitely one of the toughest ones I've ever written.

One thing I want to explore with this story is the possibility for a canon Tom Riddle to not become a Dark Lord. While I don't think that anyone can be 'born evil', JKR once said that Voldemort is a 'raging psychopath' and that is what I'm basing this story on.

By definition, psychopaths cannot feel guilt over their actions. They generally perceive the world and other people in relation to their own personal gain. So for Tom Riddle to willingly give up his ambition to rule the world as a Dark Lord, the reason should be an entirely selfish one. He is not going to do it for anyone but himself.

But I've talked enough. I'm not an expert in psychology and I'm only trying to piece together a (somewhat) believable story, so please excuse my poor understanding on this subject.

Chapter 21: Changing Perspectives

Albus sat in silence for a long while after Tom's recounting. He had wondered what had turned Tom back, but this was not at all what he had expected to hear.

In the worst way possible, Tom had learned what Voldemort failed to understand – that love made one strong and that a person without love was in reality the lowest and weakest of all. Even though Tom might not have understood what it really meant to love and to be loved, he had always been very sensitive when it came to 'weaknesses'. He understood that continuing the way he had been would only put him well beneath everyone else instead of above them like he had always envisioned himself to be and that, Albus knew, was unacceptable for him. That knowledge was what had turned Tom back in the end. There hadn't been a change of heart, nor had there been any signs of remorse.

That thought unsettled Albus, but it obviously hadn't bothered his counterpart. In fact, the other Albus Dumbledore had been unusually lenient towards Tom Riddle. Even after knowing that Tom had murdered his father and grandparents, the other Albus Dumbledore had still believed that Tom could be saved. No, he had risked everything in order to save the young man – the young murderer – who had shown little signs of wanting to change.

Albus wondered what had gone through his counterpart's mind when he sealed the Unbreakable Vow with Tom. Such recklessness. Such irresponsibility. Such selfishness.

Oh, Albus was sure that there had been other reasons behind that unthinkable deal besides selfish desires, but for his counterpart to have put so much faith in Tom – much more than what he had deserved – and forsaken the safety of both the wizarding world and the muggle world, there was only one possible explanation: The other Albus Dumbledore had in time become very fond of Tom Riddle, so much so that he had let his personal feelings cloud his judgement.

Albus closed his eyes as his disapproval over his counterpart's actions clashed painfully with reality – that the gamble had paid off in the end.

Would Tom have reached that same decision if no one had been there to guide him? Would he have simply brushed his doubt away as he had obviously tried to if he had been allowed to deal with the whole traumatic experience on his own? Would he have been willing to turn away from his original path if the other Albus Dumbledore had not spent over two years trying to show him that the other path was just as rewarding?

Albus did not know, but he was not about to deceive himself by denying his counterpart's involvement in turning Tom back from that dark path. And he knew, from what Tom had hinted earlier, that the other Albus Dumbledore had also indirectly caused Tom's spell to fail in the Riddle House.

"Why didn't the spell work?" he asked, feeling that now was an appropriate time to voice the question. That incident had been the key to everything.

Tom reached out and grabbed the broken locket on the desk, staring at it blankly. Recounting his past had obviously taken a toll on him.

"To successfully perform any dark magic, you have to mean it," he explained. "Merely wanting to live forever isn't enough to create a Horcrux, you need to believe, truly believe, that it is worth giving up half of what makes you human in exchange for immortality." Tom paused then looked up at Albus. "All through my sixth year, your counterpart had been trying to show me that there are things in this world that power couldn't give me. He hoped to steer me away from that path before it was too late. He failed, but apparently not as much as I originally thought."

Understanding dawned on Albus. Indeed, his counterpart had not failed. Even though he had not been successful in deterring Tom from murdering his own father, he had obviously managed to give Tom a taste of what life was like beyond that destructive path he had once considered his only option. The ability to appreciate, if not the people, then the many wonders in the world; the ability to reason and to learn from mistakes; the ability to let out a genuine laugh and to understand the meaning of happiness - these were what set humans apart from monsters.

Only someone who was willing to pay the price would be able to create a Horcrux. Only someone who considered all those qualities

that made a human worthless would be able to throw them away without a second thought.

And Voldemort had made one when he was only sixteen.

That thought sent a shiver down Albus' spine. The more he heard about Tom's past, the more he realized how little he knew about the young man that later became Lord Voldemort. Oh, he knew enough from the memories he had collected to deduce what objects the Horcruxes might be, but beyond that, he knew very little about Tom Riddle. What interested him? What motivated him? What made him the way he was?

Albus did not know. He had never been close to Tom Riddle and had never found any reason to get to know the young man beyond what little interactions they had had during Transfiguration classes. And that, Albus realized now, was where he had failed.

If only –

No, it would not do for him to dwell on what could have been. Not now, Albus told himself sternly.

As usual, Tom caught on to his train of thought. "I did not tell you my past just so you could blame yourself, Albus. I merely believed it was necessary for you to at least know a little more about the man, whose soul you've been trying to destroy."

Albus eyed Tom curiously. "Are you saying I should feel sorry for Voldemort, Tom?"

For perhaps the first time, it was a genuine question. While Tom had made it clear that he was less than impressed with Voldemort's tactics regarding the war, he always seemed to be oddly defensive when it came to the Dark Lord. He was obviously not happy with what he found in this world, but his attitude towards Voldemort's involvement in creating such a world was that of understanding instead of condemnation.

A sardonic smile crossed Tom's face. "Sorry? No, don't be. Why should you feel sorry for someone who's perfectly happy with what he's doing? It's in his nature, Albus, it's in our nature. I know better

than to let it control my life, but he never had any reason to act differently. And even for me, it isn't easy. It isn't easy at all."

"I've always been different." What Tom had said earlier about his experience in the orphanage echoed in Albus' mind.

After a moment of silence, Tom picked up from where he left off and continued his tale. "I left Britain right after my graduation and spent the next four years travelling around the world. I wanted find a new path for myself since the one I had chosen ceased to be an option, but it was not easy. I saw all those people around me living in ignorance. I knew I could easily make them like me and do whatever I asked of them. They were all fools, so weak, so easily manipulated." A strange glint entered Tom's eyes. "I could have easily risen above them all and none of those fools would have been able to stand against me. It felt so right. All the power I could get and it was all within my -" Tom cut himself off abruptly and the glint in his eyes disappeared. "By that time, I was lost, I was angry and I had become so sick of denying myself at every turn that sooner or later I would have done something that brought me back to my... original path. I couldn't let that happen. I had made my choice and I would have control over how I live my life, even if it meant I had to rip apart everything that I had built in the past.

"With that in mind, I ended my journey and turned myself in to the Ministry. I told the whole world that Tom Riddle murdered his own father and grandparents. With that one move, I turned them all against me and I knew they would forever think twice before trusting me again. I couldn't care less how they think of me, but Voldemort, at least when he was still trying to gain power, feasted on these people's ignorance. For me, that move meant a battle won against that monster – and I desperate needed that victory. Of course, some of my earliest 'followers' still believed that it was all part of my plan. With their positions in the Ministry, they managed to keep my sentence to the minimum."

So that was why Tom had only spent seven years in Azkaban when he should have been sentenced for a life term. While Albus did not believe for one second that Tom Riddle would ever allow himself to waste away in prison, he had expected a little more remorse behind Tom's reason to finally own up to his crime.

"I have wondered for many times since then if I had made a mistake. It was the best move strategically and I was young enough that I could afford losing a few years of freedom, but I had... underestimated what Azkaban would have done to me." Tom stared at his covered right forearm, where he had been branded when he was sent to the wizarding prison. "They said no matter who you are, the Dementors can always find a way to break you," a self-mocking smile appeared, "but of course I considered myself above that fact back then. I should have known after what I had experienced in the Riddle House, Azkaban was the last place I would ever want to be."

It wasn't hard to guess what Tom's worst memory was. And having to relive that memory for seven years would have driven anyone insane, even someone like Tom Riddle.

"I couldn't quite recall what happened when I was finally released, except that your counterpart was waiting for me at the shore and ended up having to drag me back to his house. I stayed there for over two months. It was summer and the school year had just ended, so Albus was there with me all the time. It wasn't a pleasant couple of months, for both of us, but I managed to... come back to my senses eventually.

"I was offered the Defence position at the end of that summer. After wandering around the world for years and later sitting alone in my cell, I longed to return to Hogwarts, so I accepted the offer and, as you already know, remained until now." He paused then tilted his head. "I think that about covers everything. Satisfied now, Albus?"

Albus knew this was the most Tom was ever going to tell anyone about his past. And he suspected that the only reason for Tom to have agreed to share his secrets so freely was the fact that he was from another world, and whatever he said and did was unlikely to carry any consequences for him.

Every action was measured. Every word was spoken with a specific purpose in mind. That was what Albus remembered from the young Slytherin he had once taught. Long ago, when the war was still in a brewing stage, Albus had wondered what had turned that young man into such a complete monster. But the more lives Voldemort had taken, the more Albus' curiosity had faded until nothing but hatred was left.

Hatred. Such a strong word, but perhaps it was only appropriate to describe how much Albus loathed the man who called himself Voldemort, the man who had destroyed countless lives without feeling, without remorse.

But now, Albus found that the hatred had subsided, replaced by a curious mix of sympathy and disgust. Tom had been right when he said his story would tell him who Voldemort was. Albus finally knew the answer to the question he had almost forgotten after years of war.

Voldemort had not suddenly transformed from a charming yet dangerous young man into a complete monster that acted without logic and rationality. No, Voldemort was the true face of Tom Riddle. The creation of multiple Horcruxes might have triggered the switch, but the monster had always been present. Everything else that Voldemort had shown the world was simply an act, a disguise that masked the impulsive and savage monster within. And now that Voldemort had moved past the stage when he still needed to depend on others to gain power, he no longer needed to hide who he really was.

Looking back at Tom now, Albus couldn't help wondering warily just how much of what he had seen was real.

"You don't actually feel sorry for the murders, do you, Tom?" he stated it more as an observation than a question. "Your confession was just for show."

From Tom's real intention behind his confession to his warning the students against the Dark Arts, Tom seemed to have a tendency to change those around him instead of looking inward and reviewing what needed to be changed within himself. How much could such a man change?

An amused look crossed Tom's face, as though he was savouring a private joke. But his amusement faded as quickly as it came, leaving behind a kind of tiredness that Albus knew had nothing to do with recounting his past. For the first time since Albus had met him, Tom looked very much his age.

"I know what you're getting at, Albus. You don't have to worry about having another Dark Lord on your hands. What I just told you

happened many years ago and I am no longer that boy who was struggling between two different paths." He leaned back in his chair and smiled. "I'm a little too old for that, in any case. I'm not about to go all the way back, destroy everything that I've built again and start gathering followers or taking up Voldemort's disappointingly unimpressive work in this world."

Albus smiled faintly at that deliberate jab at Voldemort's incompetence. No, he did not believe Tom would return to that dark path again. Even if Tom did not feel remorseful over what he had done, even if he refused to take part in the war against Voldemort, he simply had too much to lose by giving in to the deep desire inside him.

"It's in his nature, Albus, it's in our nature," Tom had said earlier.

Was there a limitation to how much a person could change? Was this the most Tom was capable of?

Albus met Tom's gaze. Deep inside Tom's eyes, there was a kind of tiredness that Albus knew was reflected in his own. Despite his misgivings about some of the deeds Tom had done, he could feel his respect for the man grow now that he had heard the story of his past.

"Thank you, Tom, for telling me," he said sincerely.

Tom dipped his head in acknowledgement then he turned to look out of the window. The sky was slowly brightening. Hours had passed without them noticing.

"I'd better leave and get a little sleep before my first class today," he said, rising to his feet.

"I shall see you later in the Great Hall, then, Tom," said Albus.

He watched as Tom made his way out of the office and felt his own exhaustion catching up to him. It had been a long night, but he was certain that he would not be able to get any decent sleep. Neither would Tom, for that matter, despite what the man had said.

The next two days following the discussion in Dumbledore's office passed quickly for Severus and put him in a constant bad mood – a

fact that was not lost on the students. He still had yet to find out anything concerning the Dark Lord's Horcruxes, but he had learned much about Tom Riddle. Just the day before, Dumbledore had shown him a series of memories about the Dark Lord's earlier life via a pensive. It had not taken Severus long to identify them all as clues that Dumbledore had collected about the possible objects that the Dark Lord might have turned into Horcruxes. The diary had been destroyed, as had the ring and the locket. Then there was Nagini, if Dumbledore's deduction was to be believed, Hufflepuff's Cup and another artefact that belonged to the Founders. The snake never left the Dark Lord's side, but she was never hidden, which made her an easy target. Locating the cup and the last Horcrux was Severus' priority.

And speaking of priority-

"Come in," he said as he heard a knock on his door.

The door opened and Thomas Kray strode in, carrying a few books in his hands and wearing the same smirk that Severus had seen on a younger Tom Riddle's face in Dumbledore's pensive.

In the past two days, Kray had acted as though nothing had happened in the Headmaster's office. To Severus' annoyance, he could tell that Kray was not trying to evade the issue. The indifference had been genuine – aside from his own amusement, it truly did not matter to Kray at all whether Severus knew about his identity or not.

Kray took the seat in front of Severus' desk without invitation and set down the three books in his hands. "The first two are copies of my own notes on different techniques in Defence. The last one contains the instructions of several potions that you may find interesting. And this," he pulls out a vial from his robe, "is the antidote to Nagini's venom. With some work, you should be able to produce more."

Severus took the vial from Kray's hand carefully. Nagini never left the Dark Lord's side, so there was no chance for anyone to extract enough of the snake's venom to produce an antidote. It was logical to assume that the Dark Lord would have the antidote – owners of poisonous snakes all did – as would Kray.

"And you are giving it to me because..."

"At least half of what these books contain has not been discovered in this world and I don't want to risk the knowledge being lost forever."

It was then Severus was reminded of the fact that Kray was, among his many façades, a researcher. He took the three books in his hands. The books contained knowledge that did not exist in this world, and Severus would be the first to learn them. A foreign sense of anticipation flowed through him, urging him to open the books and dive into the knowledge that they offered.

"Yes, I thought you'd appreciate them," said Kray, looking pleased.

Severus stared down at the books and suddenly felt a sense of déjà vu over the whole situation.

"Was that what he promised you?"

Severus looked up sharply.

"Knowledge," Kray continued. "And with knowledge, comes power. That's what Voldemort offered you to make you join him, wasn't it?"

Severus could not bring himself to answer, but Kray clearly did not expect him to, since he spoke up again shortly.

"And yet you left him even though you don't agree with Albus' ideology in any way." Kray paused then leaned forward. "You know, Severus, sometimes I wonder what would have happened if you never met Lily Evans before Hogwarts."

Severus tried his best to keep his face blank. How did Kray –

"You knew me," he said. "You knew me in your world."

"Naturally," said Kray. "I've taught your counterpart for six years."

Something didn't sound right. "Six?"

"He was expelled," said Kray offhandedly. "I have not seen him since, so don't bother asking what happened to him."

Expelled? What had the other Severus Snape done to warrant expulsion? With some effort, Severus quenched his curiosity about the other world – he knew Kray well enough to tell that he was not going to get any more information on the subject. Something that had been puzzling him before, however, was now starting to make sense.

"You sought me out at the beginning of the term not because you really needed assistance, but because you were uncertain about my staying in this school. You were reminded of what my... counterpart in your world had done that caused him to be expelled."

"Yes," admitted Kray easily. "You can't teach and you have no idea how to deal with children, and yet Albus lets you stay here as the head of my house. Puzzling, don't you agree? Of course, since then I have found out that Albus seems to be the only one who is happy about the situation."

Severus brushed away his annoyance – both at Kray and Dumbledore - and seized the opportunity to turn the conversation back to Kray. "Aren't you doing the same? Dumbledore told me you've been teaching Defence in your own world for over thirty years. Why waste your life away in Hogwarts?"

"Unlike you, Severus, I happen to find the position quite fulfilling," said Kray, though the casualness that he had shown since entering the room had disappeared.

"As fulfilling as ruling the wizarding world, I am sure," said Severus sarcastically.

Kray narrowed his eyes. "What are you trying to say?"

"You could have done so much more, why didn't you?" pressed Severus.

Kray studied him for a long while before saying slowly, "People do change, Severus."

Severus found Kray's answer... disappointing. He had expected more. No, he had craved for a stronger reason for this man to give up all he could have achieved and stayed in this school as a mere teacher.

"But of course, I see now that you haven't changed much at all," said Kray. "You still believe in him, don't you? You would never have turned back had Voldemort not killed Lily Evans."

Severus stiffened at the mention of Lily.

"I am disappointed, Severus," Kray continued, in a way not unlike the Dark Lord. "Surely you have figured out by now that what Voldemort told you were all but false promises? He's nothing more than a sadistic monster."

It took a moment for Severus' mind to register the fact that he was not talking to the Dark Lord, but Thomas Kray. The sudden fear that had gripped him turned into anger.

"Is he?" he challenged, glancing briefly at the books in his hands. "You could have done so much more, and yet you've spent the majority of your life hiding among the mediocre. That's why you refused to get involved in this war, that's why you still have not sought out the Dark Lord, because you know that even though he may have pushed too far, he's still far more powerful than you are."

Severus could feel the temperature in the room dropping suddenly and reflexively reached for his wand. He wasn't sure why he had bothered saying all that, but knowing who Kray was had changed everything for him. Over the past several weeks, he had come to know Kray quite well and, even though he would never admit it out loud, he had learned a lot simply by working alongside him. But now, Severus found that the truth had made him think less of Kray, because he knew that what he had seen wasn't even half of what this man could become.

Gradually the temperature in the room returned to normal. "What do you want, Severus?" asked Kray in a quiet voice. "I'm not from this world, and I certainly do not need a follower."

Severus looked up sharply, unable to mask his shock.

Kray nodded towards the books in Severus' hands. "I expect you to finish reading them in two weeks. We'll discuss what you've learned by then."

He stood and left the room without another word. Severus stared after him, stunned and shaken.

Three days later found Tom walking into the Room of Requirement. His face was closed off as he stopped before a large cupboard with blistered surface. He could feel a presence trying to invade his mind, but his mental shield held strong. He pulled out his wand and in a swift motion pointed it at the diadem lying on the ground.

The presence attacked again, stronger and more desperate this time, but he paid it no attention and began to chant under his breath. The tip of his wand glowed red and in the next moment the diadem was engulfed by fire.

A haunting scream rang through the room, but Tom's face remained impassive. He tightened his grip on his wand and at once the all-consuming flame shot outward from where the diadem had been. Not a single crevice in the room remained untouched as the fire continued to spread, turning everything in its path to ash.

Protected by an invisible wall that blocked off the fire, Tom stood in the middle of the room as everything around him burned. He closed his eyes, immersing himself completely in the magic around and within him. Raw power flowed through his veins and he could feel the magic of the ancient castle swirling around him, howling wildly as one of its founders' heir let his magic run free for the first time in decades.

Chapter 22: The Fifth Horcrux

Tom took in the state the room was in. Half of the objects in the room had vanished and all that was left was a thick layer of ash on the floor. Larger objects that survived the relentless fire were reduced to useless heaps that scattered around the room.

Dazed by the addicting exhilaration brought by unrestrained use of Dark Magic, Tom stared down at his wand. He wondered what Albus would say if he knew –

But Albus wasn't here - not the Albus who mattered, in any case. Tom was in another world, and whatever he did here would not affect his own world. He could do anything, anything at all and there wouldn't be any -

He stopped at his own thoughts. What was wrong with him?

Once again he looked around the room, taking in the damage. While Fiendfyre was one of the best ways for one to destroy a Horcrux, he could have stopped once the diadem had been destroyed. Instead he had fuelled the spell with his anger and let the fire spread.

Was he trying to prove something? No, why would he need to? He was not from this world and whatever Voldemort did was not his concern.

Or so he had tried to convince himself.

Tom sighed and pocketed his wand. He had known the moment he found out what his counterpart had become in this world that nothing good would ever come out of this little trip of his. That was why he had been extra careful about getting involved in this world's events. And now...

Things had started to change when he discovered the diadem in this room and heard Voldemort's voice claiming that that he had not changed at all and could still be turned.

Then there was his long recounting of his past three days ago. In the process of telling Albus what had happened in his world, he had dug up memories that he had not visited for a long time. And as he

spoke of those dark years in his life, an uneasy feeling had settled inside him and had been growing ever since. It was as though the consequences of the choice he made fifty years ago was only hitting him for the first time, and only now was he able to see clearly what he had given up and what he had willingly submitted himself to.

There was also Snape, who had compared him to Voldemort in a considerably different way than Albus had. Ignorant as Snape was, the bold comparison had forced Tom to finally acknowledge that things had changed. No longer was his journey about satisfying his curiosity. No longer was he a mere observer. No longer was Voldemort a random Dark Lord that happened to be threatening this world, but the embodiment of all that Tom had been fighting against for years. Somehow, the war against Voldemort had become a very personal conflict, with the battlefield not over Britain, but within himself.

And so he had charged into this room and destroyed Voldemort's Horcrux despite his own resolution to leave it alone just a few weeks ago. It was not because he was trying to prove anything, but because he realized he could no longer stay away from this war.

Now that he had destroyed the Horcrux, however, he wondered just what had stopped him from doing so in the first place and why he had felt the need to defend Voldemort. After all, he was the one who had sacrificed everything to stay away from that dark path, not Voldemort.

Tom shook his head and turned to leave the room. It didn't matter now. He merely had to make sure this little episode would not happen again. If he was to continue his stay in this world, he had better maintain a firmer control over his emotions and magic.

On his way out, Tom glanced at the remains of what used to be the Vanishing Cabinet not far away from him. Its surface had been darkened and one of its doors had fallen halfway off its hinges. It was useless now. Even though its physical appearance could be restored, its magical property had been destroyed permanently by the fire and nothing could ever bring back the connection it had with its twin, wherever it was.

Albus would definitely be pleased by this turn of events. Not only had Tom destroyed one of Voldemort's Horcruxes, he had also

stopped Draco Malfoy from opening a secret passage that led Voldemort's armies right into the heart of Hogwarts – bypassing all the wards that protected the castle.

For reason that Tom couldn't fathom, Draco had taken to confiding in Moaning Myrtle and Tom knew just how to get this particular ghost – who was already terrified of him to begin with - to talk. It had not taken him long to find out what the blonde was up to. That was why he felt no regrets over destroying that Cabinet, because even though he always protected his snakes, that protection ended when one of them decided to endanger the rest of the House, and in this case, the rest of the school.

The trouble was still far from over, however. Tom still wasn't sure why Voldemort had chosen Draco for the task, but he did know the consequences for failing would not be pretty. Should he intervene though? Or would getting close to the boy make things worse, given Voldemort's order for all of his followers to capture Tom on sight?

With a tired sigh, Tom left the devastated room. Things had changed; there was no denying it anymore. It was time for him to rethink his position in this war and he had a feeling that he was soon going to spend a good portion of his free time in the presence of a very cheerful Albus Dumbledore.

With Voldemort spreading fear across Britain with raids and murders, a few more students had been withdrawn from school and even more had left when Christmas holidays arrived. Tom grimly wondered just how many of them would come back when the new school term began.

After shocking Albus with the news of the diadem, Tom had managed to steal some time to spend on his research - the one thing he initially came to this world for. He did not expect his time of peace to last for long, and indeed, it ended just a week after the holidays began.

The day started normal enough with Tom spending most of his time reading. The alarm went off about an hour before dinner when a familiar feeling of emptiness rushed through him, signalling the destruction of yet another Horcrux. No more than ten minutes later he was summoned by Filch to the Hospital Wing, where he found Albus lying on a bed, unconscious.

"What happened?" he asked, approaching Albus' bed.

Pomfrey was running diagnosis on the old wizard. Behind her stood McGonagall and Snape with the latter currently glowering at one Harry Potter. The boy was sitting on the bed next to Albus', clearly distressed, but didn't seem to have been injured.

The Potions Master looked up and narrowed his eyes when Tom came too close for him to ignore. Neither of them had forgotten how their last conversation ended.

"The Headmaster has apparently gone on an excursion with Potter," said Snape.

"Excursion," Tom repeated. A barely noticeable nod from Snape confirmed what he already knew – Albus had found another Horcrux, and he had obviously brought Potter with him.

Tom looked over Pomfrey's shoulder at the unmoving figure on the bed. Though Albus didn't seem to have any external injuries, he was very pale and he was sweating profoundly - both were the symptoms of magical exhaustion. Albus had used too much power for his body to handle, which meant -

Tom swore inwardly as he glanced at Albus' hand. The curse was spreading now that Albus' magic was too weak to hold it back. That suicidal old fool! What had he been thinking?

"I'm still waiting, Potter."

Snape's sneering voice drew Tom's attention back to Potter, who shot Tom a wary look before speaking.

"Professor Dumbledore said there was something he needed to do in Malfoy's Manor, but he didn't tell me what that was."

Tom could tell that the boy was lying even without using Legilimency.

"Mrs. Malfoy and... Bellatrix Lestrange were there," Potter continued. "They noticed us when we were leaving, then Voldemort came." He glanced at Tom in a decidedly unsubtle way. "Professor Dumbledore

threw me a portkey and sent me back here. I don't know what happened next, but I suppose they duelled."

The fact that Albus had ended up overusing his magic gave Tom some idea about his counterpart's power, though it couldn't be too accurate since Albus had been weakened by the curse in his hand. It would help if Tom knew how that duel ended, but he doubted Potter could tell him.

From the look on the boy's face, he seemed to believe that the situation could have ended differently had he been there to help – if one could even call that help - the Headmaster. Tom was starting to understand why Snape insisted that the boy was hopelessly arrogant.

At least Albus still had enough sense to pull his student out of harm's way... or did he? Tom did a double take as he saw the peculiar self-assured look inside the pair of emerald green eyes.

"He sent you back here with whatever you found in that manor, didn't he?" he asked. "And he told you how to destroy it."

The boy stiffened, confirming Tom's guess. Albus had treated this not only as a mission to extract a Horcrux, but also as training for this boy - Harry Potter had just faced and destroyed a piece of Voldemort's soul alone.

As for why such training was necessary, Tom could only think of one possible answer – one that he had suspected for quite some time.

"I don't see how that concerns you, Professor," said Potter, his eyes blazing with anger.

Tom sighed inwardly. Just as he thought he had gotten through to the boy that he was not Voldemort, his counterpart had come and ruined it. Whatever the piece of soul inside the Horcrux had said or done to Potter, it had set off the boy's quick temper.

"Five points from Gryffindor for your attitude, Mr. Potter," said Tom, stepping away from the bed to give some space for Pomfrey, who had finished her diagnosis on Albus and was now giving the boy a quick check-up.

Tom watched as she worked, taking in her unusually pale face and the slight trembling of her hand as she handed Potter a strengthening potion. After such a close examination, it would be impossible for her to not have noticed the fact that Albus was dying from a curse.

As it was, Tom was not surprised when she dismissed the boy right after the examination.

"But-" Potter shot a look first at Tom, then at Albus. Tom raised an eyebrow, daring the boy to voice his concern out loud.

"The Headmaster will be fine, Mr. Potter," said Pomfrey. "Off you go now."

Potter hesitated, then, realizing a lost battle, wisely obliged and left the Hospital Wing. Snape waited for Pomfrey to ward the door then moved at once to Albus' side. Tom stood behind him, watching closely as the Potions Master examined Albus' hand.

"How is Albus?" asked McGonagall with a frown.

"Magical exhaustion," said Pomfrey.

McGonagall looked taken back, which was understandable. Albus was one of the most powerful wizards in the world and for him to have tired himself to this extent was almost impossible, even if he had been duelling Voldemort. Unless, of course, one counted in the fact that Albus had been exhausting his magic constantly to suppress the effect of the curse inside him.

He waited for the inevitable revelation from Pomfrey, only to find the matron staring at him with a hesitant look.

"I appreciate your precaution, Madam Pomfrey," Tom drawled, "but I am well aware of Albus' conditions."

Pomfrey narrowed her eyes as she looked from him to Snape, who had pulled out his wand and pressed it against Albus' hand. "Why didn't you alert me —"

"You wouldn't be able to do anything, as you well know," snapped Snape without looking up.

"What's going on?" McGonagall interrupted them impatiently.

Pomfrey hesitated before answering. "The curse inside Albus' hand is still inside him," her voice was steady, but her eyes betrayed her shock and fear, "and it's killing him."

McGonagall paled. "But Albus said it had been broken."

"He lied," said Tom dryly. It was the best move strategically given Albus' position in the war, but Tom had thought he at least trusted Minerva McGonagall enough with that news.

"The curse was created by the Dark Lord himself," said Snape. "It is designed to kill and the most we were able to do at the moment was to suppress it."

"We should send him to St. Mungo's," said Pomfrey.

"And alert the whole country that the only wizard Voldemort ever fears is dying?" said Tom. "No, we are on our own to find the cure."

For once, Snape didn't challenge him about the curse being unbreakable despite the fact that they still had yet to make any breakthrough. Tom was starting to get annoyed by this oddly deferential attitude that Snape had adopted towards him.

"Could you?" asked McGonagall, directing the question at Tom.

Tom met her gaze and could read her thoughts clearly – if anyone could find the cure to a curse that Voldemort invented, it would be Tom.

"I am doing what I can," he said.

A sharp intake of breath made Tom look back at Snape. The Potions Master was clenching his left forearm tightly.

It took Tom a moment to remember that was how his counterpart summoned his followers.

"Go," he said, stepping forward and pulling out his wand. "I'll make sure he lives."

Snape glanced briefly at him, then nodded and quickly swept out of the room.

Tom stared after him. Another Horcrux had been destroyed and Voldemort was no doubt in rage. It was going to be a tough night for all of his followers, but especially for Snape, who had been ordered and failed to 'capture the rogue Horcrux'.

But since Snape was still the only one who could possibly do the job given his position at Hogwarts, his life still had its value to Voldemort. So even though several rounds of Cruciatus were probably inevitable, Tom was certain that the man would live through the night.

And to think Snape had done all this for one woman -

Tom snorted inwardly as he turned his attention back to Albus' curse. Lovesick idiot or not, it might be worth checking Hogwarts' wards to make sure Snape didn't pass out in pain on the grounds and died of exposure in this cold weather; it would be such a waste after all the work Tom had done to prepare the man for the knowledge he intended to leave in this world.

A/N: Nothing big really happened in this short chapter, but the pace will pick up again soon, I believe. Next chapter will be about Snape and we'll probably find out a little more about the other Snape as well.

Some of you asked about Tom's power in comparison to Voldemort's. My explanation is that Voldemort depends extensively on his power to do the work for him, instilling fear in both his followers and his enemies. Tom, on the other hand, focuses on knowledge. He has been pushing the limit of what magic can do, but not necessarily what he himself can do. He isn't weak by any means, but compared to Voldemort, he is not as inclined to strengthen his magical power and duelling skill.

Again, as I mentioned in the last chapter. I've been very busy with RL, so I can't say for sure when the next update will be. Sorry about that.

Chapter 23: Planning Ahead

Severus staggered towards Hogwarts, still shaking from the after-effects of the Cruciatus Curse. Even when he reached the entrance doors of the old castle, the Dark Lord's cold hissing voice was still echoing in his mind.

Draco Malfoy had somehow come to the realization that he couldn't possibly kill Dumbledore and had decided to bargain with the Dark Lord. Instead of bringing him Dumbledore's head, Draco would bring him Thomas Kray, who all Death Eaters had been told to capture on sight.

Draco didn't know that this alternative mission was equally impossible, considering who Kray really was, but the Dark Lord was well aware that the boy would not be successful. Nonetheless the Dark Lord had agreed to Draco's bargain, knowing that Severus would be forced to complete the boy's task. No doubt Bellatrix had told the Dark Lord all about the Unbreakable Vow Severus had made during the summer.

"I have given young Malfoy a week into the coming school term to complete his new mission. If he fails, there will be consequences." There was a brief pause. "But we don't want that, do we, Severus?"

Now that he was away from the Dark Lord, the anger that he had suppressed in the meeting was coursing through him. That fool! How naïve could that boy be? Bargaining with the Dark Lord?

The Dark Lord had essentially threatened Severus, not Draco, with death should he fail to deliver Kray within the time limit. Was it simply an indication of the Dark Lord's desperation? Or was it a sign of the Dark Lord's suspicion over Severus' loyalty? After all, Severus was the one who had been ordered to capture Kray before Christmas and failed to complete the mission. He was also the one who told Dumbledore that Bellatrix had retrieved Hufflepuff's Cup from her vault.

Or was it something else? Something that made the Dark Lord believe Severus might not give his best to complete the mission?

Kray's voice drifted into Severus' mind, "I'm not from this world, and I certainly do not need a follower."

Severus pushed that thought away. There's no point distracting himself with what Kray had said. He had enough to deal with as it was.

He walked up the stairs towards the Hospital Wing, intending to check on Dumbledore before going back to his room, where he had stored some potions for the after-effects of the Cruciatus Curse.

He should have known his long night was far from over.

Entering the Hospital Wing, Severus found the last person he wanted to see lounging in a chair beside Dumbledore's bed. Kray waved his hand and the door shut behind Severus.

"What did he want?"

"What else could he have wanted, Riddle?" Severus snarled.

"In a bad mood, aren't we?" Kray smirked. "How long did he put you under? Five minutes?"

Severus narrowed his eyes. "At least twenty," he gritted out.

For a brief moment Kray looked surprised. Then he took out something from his pocket and held it out. "Half a vial should be enough."

Severus took the vial cautiously and examined the deep green potion inside. He uncorked the vial and sniffed at its contents. It was the pain reliever for the Cruciatus Curse. Severus was the one who invented it, and he had never shared the brewing instructions with anyone.

"I see you recognize this potion," said Kray, eyeing Severus curiously. "A student of mine invented it seven years ago."

Severus invented it shortly after his graduation. "Who?"

"He was never born in this world," said Kray after a long pause. He motioned to the vial. "Drink it."

It was a command and Severus found himself doing as Kray said. The cool liquid washed away most of his pain and relaxed his trembling muscles. It also left a bitter aftertaste that was annoyingly fitting to how he felt about his current situation.

Looking up, he saw Kray eyeing him with clear amusement. "How obedient," he said. "Albus and my counterpart have trained you well. Well enough to endure torture for failing a mission that you couldn't possibly complete without my cooperation."

Years of dealing with Dumbledore and the Dark Lord helped Severus to control his annoyance and focus on the matter at hand. "You talk as if you've changed your mind."

"It's about time for the long overdue meeting, don't you agree, Severus?"

Severus was certain that Dumbledore would not agree, but it was his own life on the line. And while Severus had no wish to tell Kray about the Unbreakable Vow, he would rather not be killed for an unnecessary charade.

"I assume you're still the one in charge of my... capture?" Kray continued. "How much longer has he given you?"

"One week after school resumes."

Kray appeared to be deep in thought and Severus wondered what he was planning.

"I'm sure Albus will have come up with a plan by then."

Caught off guard, Severus could only stare as the older wizard turned towards Dumbledore's bed. He could have sworn Kray was smirking.

"I have slowed down the curse," said Kray, steering the conversation away from the Dark Lord, "but the damage has been done."

Severus glanced at the unmoving figure on the bed. "How long?"

"Six months."

Before the end of the school year then. The weight of what he had to do when the time came sat heavily on Severus. Then again, if he failed to complete his latest mission for the Dark Lord, he wouldn't even live long enough to become Dumbledore's murderer. Suddenly Severus felt more tired than ever, though he made sure his face showed nothing.

"That is," Kray went on, "assuming the curse still remains unbroken."

Severus didn't bother challenging Kray. The man was as unyielding as the Dark Lord was when it came to achieving what was impossible.

"No words of discouragement, Severus? Perhaps my counterpart's torture has left its mark on you after all," drawled Kray. "I'll monitor Albus' condition. Leave and take a rest. I expect to see you in my office tomorrow morning. I intend to break this curse within the next four months."

Severus glared into the pair of determined blue eyes, annoyed by the order and the casual tone the man used to dismiss him. First the Dark Lord, then Albus Dumbledore, and now there was this Dark Lord's double.

But as always, there was nothing he could do. With a quick glance at Dumbledore, he turned on his heel and strode away.

Tom watched as the Potions Master walked out of the room. Snape was still being strangely obedient, but if he expected to find a new leader in Tom then he was sorely mistaken.

"So you've been working together to break the curse."

"Surprised, Albus?" Tom glanced at the old wizard as he slowly pushed himself to a sitting position. "You're supposed to be resting. Pomfrey will have my head if she knows I'm talking to you at this hour."

Albus smiled. "Nothing you can't handle, I'm sure." He propped up his pillow and leaned back, studying Tom. "Why Severus?"

"At first, merely for information gathering."

"He impressed you."

"Yes," Tom admitted. "His attitude left much to be desired, but he is skilled enough to handle what I've been teaching him."

Not that their meetings involved much teaching, but Snape had definitely been learning from their various debates. At the very least, the Potions Master should now be able to make sense of his newly acquired research notes, and hopefully do something useful with them.

"Is that all?" asked Albus.

"What else do you expect?"

But loathe as Tom was to admit it, there was indeed another reason – the Severus Snape in this world reminded him of himself. Somehow, like Tom, the Potions Master had found himself living a life that was against what he really wanted.

While Snape had changed his allegiance, he had not changed much at heart. He still looked up to Voldemort, probably not so much for the nonexistent leadership, but for the immense knowledge and power. His constant hunger for respect had not been squashed, but instead transformed into bitterness and an almost childish tendency to stress his authority in classrooms. He likely detested Albus' ideology, but that didn't matter as far as his loyalty was concerned. It didn't even matter what Snape himself wanted, because Snape's drive came from somewhere else entirely – Lily Evans. The impact of Evans' death had been powerful enough to push Snape onto a new path and bind him to it irrevocably.

After living with a choice that went against his own desire for years, Snape's mask had slipped when he was presented with a third option – a leader who he had worked for, who understood what he wanted and who had nothing to do with the death of the woman he was obsessed with. Only that third option was nothing more than an illusion. In the end, one had to live with the choice one had made.

"While I am pleased to know that the two of you are getting along well, we need to discuss our next move," said Albus. "You're planning to meet Voldemort regardless of what I say, aren't you, Tom?"

"Think of it this way, Albus: I'll be able to eliminate another Horcrux for you. Nagini is always by his side, as you well know."

"But killing Nagini isn't what you're concerned about, is it, Tom?"

Tom eyed the old wizard coldly. "I may have told you my past, but don't think that suddenly means you know all about me, Albus. I'm not about to be tempted," he sneered at that word.

"Voldemort is dangerous."

"So am I," Tom countered.

Albus eyed him for a long while then sighed. "Severus will go with you, and you will leave once you eliminate the last Horcrux."

Tom raised an eyebrow. "Last? Isn't there another one walking around Hogwarts right now? Or have you finally sent him away to join his friends for Christmas?"

Albus turned serious. "Tom –"

"I have no wish to interfere in your plan regarding the boy, but I am curious. He seems to believe he actually stands a chance against Voldemort, and you've been encouraging this delusion of his without giving him any training." Tom tilted his head. "You are relying on Voldemort to kill him, aren't you?"

Albus closed his eyes for a long time then he nodded. "I should have told Harry the truth a long time ago, but I care too much about him," he whispered. "Perhaps it is better this way, for him to die fighting for what he believes in."

Instead of dying simply because he had to, thought Tom grimly, but wouldn't it be better for the boy to know that his death would actually amount to something? Then again, the boy was a Gryffindor.

"There is another matter, Tom," said Albus. "The war is coming to an end sooner than I expected, thanks to you, but for it to play out to its very end –"

"You need me to leave this world," Tom finished.

Since his soul was identical to Voldemort's, his presence had essentially created an effect similar to that of a Horcrux. And the same was true in the reverse direction, meaning neither of them could die as long as they co-existed in this world. With a start, Tom realized he had stumbled upon a way to achieve immortality without meaning to. He pushed this thought away and masked his excitement; he would have to look deeper into this theory.

"Don't worry, Albus, when the time comes, I'll do what I have to."

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